The Death of Digger

by Jerry Ratch

At the house one night we were all sitting around at one of those infernal communal meetings that go on into the night full of pot smoke and red wine, when the door was nudged open and a stray dog wandered into the living room. It was a strange coyote-looking thing with one blue eye and one brown eye. It immediately went over to Greg and sat down beside him like a ghost and began licking himself, well, how should I put this, you know where, and a long red erection slid out into plain view. No one wanted to say anything or seem prudish or anything in those days, so they just let him keep licking himself. After the dog finished his business, one of the women, whose tit was by the way hanging out of her low-slung wide-open blouse, got up and gave Greg a blue washrag so he could mop up the puddle of white semen sitting pooled up on the wood floor next to his leg. Then she noticed that her tit was hanging out and, with a nonchalant flick of her hand, stuffed it right back into her shirt, next brushing the hair away from her face.

But Greg tied the washrag around the dog's neck like a kerchief and named the dog “Digger” because while licking himself one of his legs kept digging into the floor as he spun around in a complete circle in ecstasy. Greg announced Digger was the official mascot of the commune. And that was how we came about inheriting our communal dog, Digger.

But Digger turned out to be a real digger if there ever was one, and immediately set about establishing his turf out in the communal gardens in The Meadow. Von Meckel, for one, became incensed about it. For one thing, his house had acquired a dog too, which they named “Lenin,” of course. And why couldn't their dog have dominion over The Meadow? Von Meckel asserted. As if there wasn't enough room over an entire block of gardens for two dogs. Well, apparently there wasn't, in the mind of the great Stalinista, Von Meckel, Lord of The Meadow!

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The next thing we knew, Von Meckel established a bulletin board at one end of the Meadow, with “rules” for all to adhere to, including apparently the dogs. Digger was named specifically as a “problem” communal citizen. Attached to this was a warning that any offending dog not adhering to “the rules” would be shot on sight.

“What!” yelled Greg when he came upon the list of rules posted on the communal bulletin board. “What gives this Stalinist fucker the right to set up his arbitrary *“rules?”* Greg was absolutely huffing and puffing as he walked into our kitchen. “Fuck him and his rules! Who does he think, does he really think he is, anyway?”

I should explain that in those days we didn't believe in violence for the sake of violence. We believed pretty much in the grand Ghandi-esque gesture, turn the other cheek, in other words. We never showed real anger or rage. We all tried our best to be “cool.” Cool — was in. It was the zeitgeist of the times to be ultra-cool. That was in fact what made us run off to Canada rather than face going to Vietnam.

So what was to come was, by any account, unusual. I don't want you to think our generation was this way by nature. Many of us, if not most, turned inward. I know I myself was that way. But there still may have been a few that wanted to — how should I put it? — hurtle our loneliness through space. To fly smack-dab in the face of Zen. To cry out in shame and horror at someone's, anyone's original sin. In other words, we all knew instinctively that we would be to blame for whatever we'd be accused of by the wider world. Which was why we hovered so close to the center of the known world of poetry at that time — San Francisco and by extension, immediately due east of that known Eden, Berkeley. If there would ever be an eruption in the crust of the earth of that world, it was bound to happen in Berkeley, the sanctified center of political correctness if there ever was one.

And speaking of political correctness, the first to fly in the face of that concept that I knew of, after the 60's were over, were a man named Peter and his wife Frances, who showed up at our door

after driving across the country in a gigantic four wheeler, towing behind them on a trailer a brand spanking new untried-on-the-road Lotus, which they had shipped across the Atlantic from London, after paying cash for it. They stowed inside special compartments inside the wheel-wells a stash of hash that not only paid for the shiny new silver Lotus, but for their entire trip to India to visit the self-same Maharishi that the Beatles had sat at the feet of, during their heavy acid era of enlightenment.

Remember, nonviolence was practically the only religion of any consequence left to our generation right about then. Peter was very short, and had a habit of tucking his hand inside his shirt for some reason, and hated anyone who was tall automatically, like Von Meckel. Greg felt immediately the weight and presence of that hatred when they confronted one another in the living room.

Greg wasn't in the habit of taking much shit from anyone, let alone a drugged-out ex-hippie who was into financing his taste in fancy cars with hashish from India. Greg was decidedly a booze man, not a drugs man. There was a definite difference in those days.

I could see Greg eying Peter and Frances arguing over seemingly every little thing. Neither of them ever seemed to be able to let anything go. They *each had to be* right.

At one point Greg interrupted, asking them, “Who wears the pants in your family?”

“I do!” they answered in unison, then looked at each other, with what I can only describe as absolute loathing.

Suddenly, from outside we could heard Von Meckel's whiny voice shouting wildly, and in a steadily rising crescendo, “No. NO. NO, NO. I said stop it, you damned mongrel. Stop digging. Bitch! BITCH! If you don't stop digging this very second, I'm going to shoot your ugly mongrel ass. I said STOP IT! STOP!”

Then there was a sudden BLAM, and a little yelp.

We all ran out of the house into the communal garden without fences. There stood Von Meckel with a smoking rifle in his hands, and our mascot Digger lying on his side, limp. We all looked at each other in disbelief.

“Holy shit,” I said. I grabbed Penny and held her. She had gone limp at my side.

Greg looked at me. “What are we gonna do, Janov?”

“I don't know. I can't believe it.”

Von Meckel's dog was sniffing at the lifeless body of Digger and looking around.

That's when Peter asked, “Do you have a gun?”

“Who?”

“Do any of you wimps have a fucking gun?”

Steve answered, “Well, no, obviously. We don't confront people that way.”

“You don't confront people?” asked Peter in the most sarcastic manner I had ever heard. He laughed out loud, and looked upward. “You don't fucking confront people?”

“Not directly,” Steve muttered, looking downward. His face had turned bright red.

All of a sudden Peter marched into the dirt where Von Meckel stood over the body of Digger. Peter snatched the rifle right out of Von Meckel's hands. I could see Von Meckel wince and cower.

“Wait! Wait!” he yelled. “Janov, tell him to wait. We got your marriage annulled. You're free of the gray-haired witch in the hills. We can all go back to the factory now and things can return to normal. Janov? Tell him to put down the gun. Tell him. Janov!”

Peter cocked the rifle, took aim, and shot Von Meckel's dog Lenin, which fell over with a whimper. You could hear the echo of the shot bounce off the houses surrounding the communal gardens along Derby Street. All four paws stretched outward, then slowly stopped moving. Lenin died.

Peter handed the rifle back to Von Meckel, who immediately dropped it in the dirt like it was on fire. Peter marched back toward our quivering little group behind our group house. He grabbed Frances by the hand and they silently marched out front of the house.

Shortly we heard him fire up the Lotus. It was quite loud. It was a real piece of machinery. We all ran to the street in front of the house.

Peter had the shiny silver Lotus backed down off the trailer into the street, and he was revving the crap out of it. Blue smoke hung in the air. All of a sudden he cranked it up real loud and took off with both back wheels peeling off huge ribbons of blue smoke. And that thing shot off down the street in first gear. When he shifted to second gear, the car's front wheels nearly left the pavement. We could hear the whine of that engine halfway down the block like we were at Le Man's.

Then something went horribly wrong. The car swung sideways one direction, then spun sideways the other, then it spun back again but too far, and all of a sudden there was a tremendous crash against an enormous immovable old elm tree, accompanied by a shattering of glass. Then silence.

We all took off running down the street like a herd of ex-hippies. When we got there, Peter was climbing out of the bent-up Lotus, which had acquired roughly the shape of a crescent around the tree trunk. Miraculously, Peter seemed unhurt, though he was certainly stunned.

Frances ran up to him complaining loudly, “You idiot! You idiot! There goes our whole fucking trip to India. The whole reason for going there. You little fucking shrimp!”

“Just shut the fuck up, will you?” Peter yelled back.

“What a fucking idiot!” Frances snapped. “Idiot! Fucking … *idiot!”*