

The Great San Francisco Poetry Wars, 10

by Jerry Ratch

It was Warren who introduced me to this bouncer fellow named John O'Toole. Warren met O'Toole and his wife, Angelina, through the dark prison poet Eugene Forcer. Forcer and O'Toole were the best of friends until a riff erupted between them one drunken night after Forcer did a poetry reading at Cody's, and all of a sudden Angelina ran off with the dark poet. O'Toole went out looking for them, but they went into hiding. I learned later that they'd taken an apartment on 61st Street off Telegraph in Oakland, purposely up on the second floor so they could spot O'Toole coming and escape by jumping into the garden dirt below if necessary, something you had to think about with someone the size of O'Toole on your tail. The grip on this guy's hands alone could kill. I myself would get the opportunity to see that with my own eyes in the next couple of months. The man could be a total brute, though the truth was he had the softest of hearts too. A real gentle giant. But get him going on a drunk jag with too much ouzo in his system, and look out.

I became very good friends with John O'Toole. We took a liking to each other, and he would end up being the minister to my wedding in the living room of the little house on Fairlawn when it came time to perform a sham marriage to Mary Jo for the sake of keeping her children. O'Toole had gotten one of those one dollar licenses to be a minister that were so popular in those days. Anyone could send away for one of these certificates. People all over town got married with those, in back yards and living rooms. At a bus stop. Just about anywhere you wanted. You would see these makeshift weddings happening all around town. It was a very cheap and easy way to tie the knot, if you were so inclined. They were great for any number of shotgun weddings when young girls got

pregnant, with their parents standing around tapping a foot impatiently.

At that same time I was laid-off from my job with the Liquidators when that stint was over, and I got the chance to finish the last third of my book, Puppet X, while collecting unemployment. If it weren't for unemployment, I don't know how these kinds of books would have ever been written in those days.

Mary Jo told me to hire somebody to marry us in a ceremony in the living room up at the house on Fairlawn. This was to take place in two days. Her divorce was final, and she had to get married or else it was all over for her child custody. I guess I was about the only one she knew crazy enough to go through a sham wedding for this purpose. Fortunately, O'Toole said he would do the ceremony for the fun of it, because he liked me, and also because I was about the only one around who was willing to listen to him cry in his beer about Angelina and her dark poet. And he wanted revenge if he ever found them, and he thought I might hear something about where they were shackled up, since I was gaining connections in the poetry world, what with Regina and Bust Loose Press about to publish Puppet X.

Warren and I were in a parking lot at Safeway after buying two bottles of Jack Daniels Black Label for the ceremony. We were standing with the door open to the green Volkswagen, belting down mouthfuls of the whiskey from a pint bottle before heading up the hill for the wedding.

"Are you sure you know what you're getting yourself into?" he asked.

"Sure I do. O'Toole's performing the ceremony. It's not really official. What's to worry?"

"Why are you doing this?"

I took another slug of the whiskey, squinting at Warren in the bright sunlight.

"Who gives a big rat's ass?"

We all wanted to act tough and manly enough to get away with just about anything. We were really one deluded generation.

Who cared about money? Who cared about drugs? Who cared about the consequences of anything? There was still an enormous meaningless war raging in Vietnam, and we just didn't give a big rat's ass, if you want to know the truth. Also, this was John O'Toole performing this wedding with his one-dollar bullshit certificate that came through the U.S. mails. What did it mean anyway, in the great grand scheme of things?

"I'm not so sure this is such a hot idea," Warren said.

We each slugged down a mouthful of the Jack Daniels.

"Ah, shit!" he gasped. His eyes started watering.

I reached into the car and turned up the volume on the radio. They were playing one of my favorite Rolling Stones tunes: "Brown Sugar."

"Ain't California great?" I said, for no reason whatsoever. My mind and my heart were beginning to soar with the whiskey.

"Is your brother coming up the hill for the wedding too?"

"He's going to be my best man."

"What!" Warren shouted, his eyes bugged out. "I thought I was your best man. Shit."

Warren stared at me. His eyes were really watering. I wasn't sure the reason now. "I mean, shit!" he said. "Are you serious?"

I nodded my head. I saw that I had made a large error in not telling Warren, but my brother had absolutely insisted, saying he had a real surprise in store for me. And my brother meant a lot to me.

"Philip!" He began whining. Warren could become a real pain sometimes. I mean, it wasn't like we were married or anything.

We knew everybody was gathering in the living room up the hill, but we kept on slugging down mouthfuls of the whiskey. It made you feel downright wise in the afternoon. I had images of Ernest Hemingway floating through my brain now. I felt the brown beard on my face. I was no Ernest Hemingway, and this was not the savannah. Warren and I stared out into the sunlit parking lot at Safeway while moms pushed baby strollers in and out of the store.

"I shouldn't be in such a rush," I said.
"That's a damned understatement!"
"Do you think I could back out of it?"
"Why not? She's not the boss of you."
"Yeah? Her lawyer is. Apparently."
"Fuck her lawyer."
"She's a lesbian. I wouldn't want to go trying that."
Warren laughed out loud. "Shit, I would."
I nodded and took another swig. We were nearing the bottom of the pint of Jack Daniels. I squinted at Warren.
"Should we get another?"
"Why the hell not?" he said, spitting on the ground like a cement worker.
"We're so bad."
He shrugged and we both started toward the Safeway store.
"Maybe I should call up at the house and tell them we'll be a little late."
"Or not at all," said Warren.
"Or that. Got a dime?"
"Hell no!"
"We're so bad."
"Hey, let's call Greg, if you want to do some serious drinking."
"Mary Jo didn't want him coming up to the house."
"You pussy!"
"Well, it kinda made sense."
"Pussy!"
By the time we got up to the house, we were rolling with whiskey, falling over each other trying to get up the front steps. John O'Toole had everything set up and waiting. Wine glasses, an open bottle of some cheap red wine. He was drinking ouzo himself, and discussing his method of spray painting with Mary Jo, who was dressed in a long flowered hippie dress. Immediately upon entering the house, I threw on a Rolling Stones album and pumped up the

volume. *"I saw her today at the reception, a glass of wine in her hand,"* they sang. If I was going to get through this, it had to be on my terms, and that would be loud rock-and-roll.

But then my brother Harris showed up with his new girlfriend, Francine. She was strumming a damned ukulele as they came up the front steps to the house. And she was singing the Hawaiian Wedding song, of all things. The Hawaiian Fucking Wedding Song!

"Why don't you turn off that nasty crap?" she shouted at O'Toole. He looked at her like he was going to throw a drunken patron out of a bar. He was a bouncer, after all, in normal life. When he didn't make a move toward the stereo, she marched right over to it. The needle skreaked across the vinyl. Ouch!

"Hey, watch out!" I yelled. "That's precious!"

She didn't even glance in my direction.

"Listen to this beeyootifull music," she said. She began strumming her ukulele again, and that awful Hawaiian Wedding song came out of her round fluorescent pink mouth. Francine had this high-pitched nasally annoying sound to her voice. Warren steadied my arm, because I'd begun to stumble backward. Man, were we ever shit-faced! I tried to focus the best I could on this Francine hick from the Oregon backwoods, whose ancestors had fled the South, God knows when or why. My brother had left his wife for this woman. When I got the chance, I cornered him and asked why.

"She's got the sweetest pussy in the world." That was all he said. I thought at first he was kidding.

"I'm not kidding," he said.

"What does that even mean?" I asked, stupidly.

"Are you ignorant of the English language?" he asked.

"No. No, I'm not."

He leaned right in my drunken face. "She's got the sweetest pussy in the world. That's all the reason I need. Right on the desk at my office at Bechtel."

"Jesus, all right," I said, waving a hand in front of my face. "I get it." I thought I smelled something. Might have been garlic.

"All right then, let's get this ceremony rolling."

Harris went up to John O'Toole and slipped him a fifty dollar bill.

"Make sure that stereo stays off, will you?"

O'Toole rocked back on the balls of his feet.

"Sure, boss. Sure."

O'Toole took off his felt hat and stuffed the bill in the hatband. It was sticking up from the front of the hat like the Mad Hatter. Things kept going from bad to worse here. There were signs, plenty of them. I should have seen it coming. If I was smart, I would have lit out of there and never looked back. I would have dragged myself down to Penny's room like a drowned cat and begged her to take me in forever.

But I did not do that. Yet. I had to see myself clear. I had to learn my lessons in life. Not everything in the life of a poet goes smoothly. You would think so, but no, apparently not.

John O'Toole rolled right into the ceremony. We all drank from the same wine glass, I don't know why. Then he suddenly asked me to crush the wine glass underfoot.

"What the heck?" I asked.

"Go ahead, pulverize it," he said.

"Why?"

"I've seen it done at ceremonies."

Who the hell is going to question a phony minister/bouncer weighing 280 lbs. minimum at a trumped-up wedding for the sake of a damned lawyer and four screaming snot-nosed brats and an aging gray-haired woman out of the Midwest in a hippie dress? I ask you.

Not me. I crushed the glass underfoot, then went over and switched on the stereo with the loudest rendition of the Rolling Stones "*Flight 505*" you've ever heard. All I really wanted to do was get my ass back down the hill and fall into the arms of my skinny-ass

Penny with the large wine-dark nipples and the smell of lilacs in her gorgeous dark hair.

I knew this wasn't the life for me, I knew it was bogus, so what did it really matter anyhow? Life was a total and complete joke. Soon enough I would be down the hill drinking at some bar, or on the stoop of Greg's flophouse hotel on Telegraph Avenue, waiting for my first book of poems to hit the streets and make an international splash. I was basking in the internal sunshine of the made-up life of a poet. Things would go well. I had every confidence in those days. Nothing could drag us down. Not even the foreign war. We were invincible.

O'Toole had us both sign this legal document saying we were married. He folded it and tucked it inside his jacket. Then he winked at me in a conspiratorial manner that meant, "Don't worry about a thing, it's all taken care of."

And I experienced a deep, long momentary existential fright.

"What are you going to do with that?" I asked.

"Don't worry about a thing," he said. "The lawyer needs to see it, that's all. Then it goes into the rubbish heap with the rest of history."

I experienced an even longer momentary existential fright.

"It's bogus, isn't it?"

"Of course, of course. You guys get going on your honeymoon. Where's that damn ouzo? *Has anyone seen my ouzo?*" he shouted.

And the reception began in earnest. But by the end of the evening, suddenly O'Toole had both hands around Mary Jo's throat, and he was throttling her, saying she had stolen his spray painting method, which actually was simply covering the entire surface of a canvas with silver spray paint and very little else that I could see. Maybe a streak of underlying red or green paint showed through, where the spray hadn't been done evenly enough.

Never trust a painter/minister/bouncer weighing 280+ lbs. with your bogus wife's throat, when it came to matters of high art,

that's what I learned. O'Toole was serious though, and I almost lost my bogus wife before we had consummated our bogus marriage, which turned out to be not so bogus.

It took both Warren and me to pry his fingers off her throat.

Then on to our trip up to Lake Tahoe, where we would stay in a freezing cabin without heat under two goose-down blankets. I was so damned drunk trying to drive along Highway 80 on the way up to the mountains that I had to pull over to barf and get a little rest in the car before proceeding.

Oh, and we fucked once while we were waiting to sober up a little at the side of the road as well. What the hell.

Those were the days!

"Don't you want to have a baby?" Mary Jo had asked. "You may already be a father anyway, for all I know."

"No, Mary Jo, I don't want to have a baby. Poets can't afford to have babies. Anyway, didn't you go back and get that abortion at Dr. Greene's on Solano?"

"Hell, no," she said, and she laughed. "I'm not ever going back to that butcher's place. That was a bad joke if I've ever seen one. Nope. No way. I'd rather have the baby. Now, come here and fuck me. Fuck me real good, you hear?"

Ah, shit. Those were the days, my friends. Those were the days.

But as it turned out, Von Rotten got one of his minions to get O'Toole drunk and steal our marriage certificate. They found out where he lived through the dark poet Eugene Forcer. Then they ran down to the county offices to register the marriage, making the marriage to Mary Jo official. Von Rotten told Penny it was registered and valid.

"Now, he says, I'm having sexual intercourse (his words) with a married man, and your wife's ex-husband can sue her and bring me in as a material witness so he won't have to pay alimony. What do you think about that?" Penny asked me.

I didn't believe her. I mean, I didn't believe him.

"How do we know that?" I asked.

She handed me a registered copy, with the official-looking stamp from the county registrar's office. I kept staring at the document with my mouth open

"Oh, shit!"

"That's right — oh, shit." Penny said. "We're not fucking again until you nullify this thing. What is this? Are you trying to be a bigamist of some kind?"

"Well, technically, I wouldn't be a bigamist until you and I got married, of course."

Penny looked at me with those deep penetrating dark eyes of hers.

"Is that a proposal of some kind?"

"Oh, shit," I said.

Now I was confused. "Well," I said, "I suppose it is."

"I accept!" she said, throwing her arms around my neck. Immediately I felt myself growing hard and she pressed her crotch against mine and she could feel it too. She began to moan.

"You take care of it, Philip. Take care of it real soon, okay? Oh, Philip, where can we go right now? Right neow!" she meowed like a cat.

So we began living in sin, as they say in the church I do not believe in. Actually I was spending half my time at Penny's and half my time with my so-called wife. Mary Jo didn't really give a damn where I slept.

Then I went to see John O'Toole, who was living in his art studio in a bad part of East Oakland, near 14th Avenue and east 14th Street. This was over near Lake Merritt. He had moved into his studio, which was in a storefront, because it was so cheap, after his wife Angelina had run off with Eugene Forcer. O'Toole was a bouncer at a bar across the street from his studio. I wanted to ask him what went wrong with my marriage certificate, why he betrayed me, seemingly.

He looked real apologetic when he saw who it was at the door of his studio.

"It was a huge mistake," he said. He was wringing his big hands. "I can't explain it. They got me drunk. I think they slipped something in my drink. When I woke up the next day, your marriage certificate was gone. The next day they told me they had run it down to the county registrar. I checked. It was true. They are one strange bunch of dudes, I'll tell you that much. They're like not dudes at all. Why would they want to do that, for Chrissake?"

"Because I'm shacking up with Von Rotten's girlfriend, that's why."

"Who?"

"He's the mastermind of the Foul Language School of poets. A rival group. He can't stand it that I'm fucking this girl Penny. I'm completely in love with her too. She's hot."

"Then why did you marry that Mary Jo woman. She's copying my paintings, you know."

"Her damned lawyer made us do it."

"Copy my paintings?"

"No, get married. It's only so she can keep the kids. Now I don't know what's going to happen. I need a drink."

"Hold it," O'Toole said. He got up slowly from his armchair, grabbing a cut-off baseball bat. I looked where he was staring. The doorknob kept turning back and forth slowly. O'Toole gestured at me. Then suddenly he yelled at the top of his lungs, *"Come on in, motherfuckers, I'll bash your brains out right now!"*

We heard stumbling footsteps running away. The noise of a trashcan falling over. Then silence.

"Motherfuckers," he said. "One time I came in and caught them in the act, right here. They dove right through a window to get away after they got a good look at me. I brained one of them real good. There was a long trail of blood running down the street. They haven't been back since, until now." He kept hitting his palm with the bat. "I can't wait for one of those motherfuckers to get inside again. Send that asshole straight to hell. C'mon, bar's across the street. Let's go knock back a few."

When we got to the bar, I pulled a copy of my book of poems out of my jacket and gave it to him: *Puppet X*. I had just gotten the first few copies from my publisher. I was real proud.

O'Toole looked at the book. He turned it over and read the quotes that were on the back cover, one of which was from Eugene Forcer: "*Very potent stuff.*"

O' Toole's face looked pained and sour. He said nothing. He looked dumbfounded and sat still at the bar for a few minutes. Then his head sank to the bar. He held up two fingers and two shots of whiskey appeared before him as if out of thin air. He downed both of them, one after the other, and held up two more fingers. "Pete, give me the knife."

The bartender set up two more shots and placed a jackknife the size of my foot on the bar. O'Toole opened the blade and cut precisely around the quote by Eugene Forcer. He pried the quote along with Forcer's name right off the cover, then handed the copy of my book back to me. Next he downed both shots of whiskey.

A man on the barstool beside us was seemingly asleep with his head lying on the bar, a half-finished beer next to his graying head.

"There are still men sad enough to drink with their heads down," John O'Toole said. "Don't ever let me see another copy of that book again."

He held up two more fingers, motioning this time for two for me as well.

I drank mine without making a comment. You didn't want to argue with John O'Toole. He was too big.

"You shouldn't have put that fucker's name on your book cover. I guess that makes us even. I'm still in love with my little Angelina. I can't help it."

O'Toole signaled again with two fingers. The night was young. Suddenly I had to go home to my lovely Penny. All I knew was I didn't want to end up drinking at a hole like this with my head down on the bar. And I left John O'Toole, still drinking. But before I left, I wrote Angelina's address down on a slip of paper and slid it

toward him. He looked at me with a wise and knowing, almost evil look to his eye.

As I left I glanced back at his hunched-over figure. He was enormous, taking up the space of two barstools. You wouldn't want to run into him in a dark alley. But I knew I could count on him in a fight, if I ever needed him.

