

The Great San Francisco Poetry Wars, 16

by Jerry Ratch

Von Rotten had us all go out and paint this huge red square around the Red Diaper Baby factory. Then he held a big naming rally, at noon, during our lunch break. We weren't allowed to eat our sandwiches. There was all this pomp and circumstance. We were each outfitted with robes, red of course, and mortar-boards with a gold tassel dangling over one eye. It made me positively dizzy. Plus I was extremely hung-over that day. Penny and I had decided to celebrate our pregnancy the night before. That was before a girlfriend told her she shouldn't be drinking if she was pregnant.

"Oh," was all Penny said. "Really? Are you sure?"

"That's what I heard," the girlfriend said. "Maybe you better ask a doctor or something to be sure."

"Next week," Penny said. "We don't have the money for a doctor. Maybe Von Rotten would know."

"Yeah, right!" I laughed. "Maybe he would know something about a sex-change operation. But about babies? I'm not so sure."

We went out and hung one on again that weekend. We went on the binge to end all binges, in fact, because Greg came along for the ride, and you didn't go anywhere with him without a jug of red wine at the very least. Well, two jugs to be exact. He had discovered that rasty Santa Cruz Cellars Zinfandel. It was upscale to him, especially since they served it upstairs at Chez Panisse. He figured this stuff had to be way beyond his usual Red Mountain Pink Chablis and well, in fact, he was right about that. Sort of.

That was when Von Rotten pulled me to one side with a proposition.

"I want you to write slogans," he said.

“Slogans? I don't think so.”

“For Red Baby Diapers. Not poetry — slogans. We need slogans.”

I thought he'd gone mad. I mean, I knew he was mad before, but this was *really* mad, like Mad Ludwig of Bavaria. Blood lust mad.

“We don't need poetry just for poetry's sake anymore. Poetry must be utilitarian now, if it's going to be worth anything to the world.”

“Sounds like Karl Marx to me.”

“*We need slogans!*” he shouted. “*Slogans, damn it, slogans!*”

But they couldn't force slogans out of a worm, and they couldn't force slogans out of me. I was absolutely 110% slogan-free! Honest!

“If you accept this mission,” he promised, “we will see to it that your marriage to that woman from the hills, what's her name, is annulled.”

“You can do that?”

He didn't reply. He didn't like to waste his precious mosquito-whining breath having to repeat what he'd just said. It was the efficiency of the poet, what little poet there was left in him. And he was absolutely clear-eyed in his mission here on earth, no matter where he may have come from originally. And there were plenty of rumors about that, believe me.

“You and Penny will have all the free Red Baby Diapers you'll need,” he added.

“So!” I shouted. Then I toned it down a notch, looking all around. “You are admitting this is our child.”

Again that stony, observant silence. Ah, what a turd! He would admit nothing of the sort.

“Just consider,” he said. “You won't get a second offer.”

With that he spun on his heel like a Nazi lieutenant and sped from the lunchroom.

"We're going to be needing those diapers," Penny said. She continued eating a prime rib sandwich. Her hunger knew no bounds now, for such a skinny girl. Lately she was wolfing down nearly anything put in her path. And she had taken on a positive glow too. There was something about that old saying, that look a pregnant woman can get. She looked so alive, somehow. I mean, she always looked alive and all, but this was something else again. Like she was alive for two now. Or more. Holy crap! I thought. What if she had twins!

Greg sat down at the table across from us. His face was deep red from all the wine he'd been drinking lately. He looked a little terrified.

"Two fucking Army recruiters showed up at the hotel yesterday, looking for Steve and me."

"Holy crap!" I said.

"I saw them and wouldn't answer the door, but they're hanging around out front on Telegraph Avenue and I slipped out back and hopped a fence and ran to your rooming house on Regent Street to pull Steve out of Hilary's pussy and she's making him fuck her damn near every hour on the hour to get pregnant so he won't have to go to Vietnam." Greg looked sad. "Think I'm heading for the border."

"What do you mean?"

"Canada!" he said, like I was either deaf or stupid. "Like everybody else."

"Talk to Von Rotten," Penny said. "Maybe he can do something."

"Man!" he said, shaking his head. "I just can't write that kind of shit."

"How about slogans?" I asked.

"Fuck no! Especially not slogans, man. Fucking slogans! No way!"

"Von Rotten wants me to write slogans."

"Ach! Don't do it, man. With your talent? No way. Just don't do it. I'd rather hunt bears in Canada. Moose! I heard they've

got moose up there that you can live off for an entire winter. Gonna go up there and bag me a moose and live off the land like the hippies. C'mon with me, Janov. You shouldn't be writing no stinking slogans, that's all. It's pathetic, what this world's coming to."

"I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't. Bullshit, you can't! I mean, one fucking moose, that's all you got to do for the whole damn winter. C'mon. C'mon, Chrissakes!"

"Penny's pregnant," I said.

Greg pulled his head way back and took a good look at me.

"Oh, man! You'll never write anything substantial again. You're so screwed."

Penny turned that beautiful neck of hers to look at me.

"No, I'm not," I said. "Look at this woman. Just look at her. Would you run off to Canada and leave something like this behind. She's like our Helen. Look at her. Look at that neck!"

"Penny, lift your shirt so I can get a good look, would ya?"

Greg could get away with something like that. Girls expected it from him. He was so nonchalant, somehow, though generally they just laughed and ignored him. But then Penny lifted her camisole and flashed him.

"Whoa, mama!" he said. "Okay, you win. Those are probably the most stunning nipples this side of Greece. You're so screwed, Janov."

"I'm the one that got screwed," Penny laughed.

"A fucking Papa!" Greg said. "You're gonna be a Papa. You're gonna be a Papa."

"Quit calling me Papa."

"Papa dum. Like Indian food," Greg sang. "Hey, hold on a minute. Can Steve use your baby to get his ass out of the draft?"

"What! Why?"

"Because no matter how hard they try, and they're like fucking every hour all night long, Hillary can't get pregnant. He's getting blue balls trying. Poor fuck's losing weight, and he can't afford to lose weight. He's skinny as fuck as it is. He's just going to

disappear, they keep it up. Course, the draft will have a hard time finding him then.” Greg laughed at his own joke, nodding his head drunkenly. “Shee...it!”

At that moment I saw O'Toole at the door of the front office. He'd come looking for his wife, but they wouldn't let him onto the floor of the factory. And again I thought I noticed someone standing nearby him. Not a shadow exactly, more like a presence, and I heard it saying:

The left nipple

That's where the heart is

I suck honey from the heart

Angelina was working on one of the cooking kettles where they extracted something from the salamanders and mixed it with beet juice, I think. Von Rotten had her working in a special room for this secret process, so she wasn't in plain sight. O'Toole's hair was all tousled, streaked with gray suddenly, and he'd been on a binge, you could tell, and he looked like he'd lost some weight. When he turned toward me, he looked surprised and tried looking away, but it was too late and our eyes fastened on each other for the next fifteen hundred years. He had a scared look about him. Haunted, hollowed-out.

He said something to one of the minions. The skinny Foul Language minion opened the door and walked over to our lunch table with a noticeable limp.

“I have a message for you. From him,” he said, nodding his head in O'Toole's direction. “He said to tell you Eugene Forcer is dead.”

I felt the floor of the building move and I leapt up from the lunch table. They sometimes had earthquakes around there, so you never knew from one minute to the next whether it was your inner life giving away, or the earth under your feet. Penny grabbed me by the arm and began petting it with both of her hands, soothing me, petting my soul from the outside to calm me down.

I looked through the glass windows at the office where O'Toole was standing. He was wringing his fat hands. He looked

pathetic. I walked out of the factory into the office. I could feel my own head bobbing up and down.

"I didn't kill him. I know what you're thinking."

"What happened?"

"I didn't do anything. You've got to believe me.

The wavery shadow kept saying:

Believing is seeing. Believing is seeing.

"There was a great fire at the hotel on Telegraph Avenue. Burned to the ground. The fucker."

"Greg's old flophouse?" I asked.

"No, the big one kitty-corner across from Cody's Books. That's where Forcer, the fucker, the fucker!..." He began blubbering.

I grabbed his arm. "Calm down."

"Forcer fuck-face was staying there with that Bubble Lady ever since the accident with his eyeglasses, you know. She took him in, claiming it was a shame and he was like Homer. Homer, yet!"

"And you set fire to the place?"

"I didn't do it, man. You of all people have got to believe me."

"Well, you can see how I might think so."

"You've got to go tell Angelina I didn't have nothing to do with this. Though if I'd thought of it myself, I might have. But I didn't. You've got to believe me. She's going to think I did it. Please, Philip. You've got to go tell her right now. Before she hears it from somebody and jumps to conclusions. She doesn't trust me anymore."

"What makes you think she'll believe me?"

"Everybody believes you. You don't tell lies. You've got to tell her right away."

"That could be a problem," I said.

"Why? Tell her, Philip. You go tell her. Where is she anyway?"

"They've got her working in this secret room where they make the special red dye and no one but her and Von Rotten knows the formula for this stuff. Something about beets and salamanders, I

heard. But they keep her locked in there while she's mixing up the secret formula.”

“Show me where the room is. They don't make a door I can't get through.”

I looked around the office. The minions were listening. One of them made a move toward a buzzer under the desk.

Gauze-like voices were singing:

Mermaids are stripping off their underpants

Boats capsize in the storm

Sirens are singing each to each

The captain is lashed to the mast

His beard's still wet with desire

Suddenly, it struck me. Almost like I'd heard a voice. I realized that Greg Penn had made a discovery of immense importance, without even realizing how immense it was. We could share babies to escape the draft, all of us! Getting pregnant was the best thing that ever happened. And if it was twins, better yet! The possibilities were endless here. In fact, and why not, how about using Mary Jo's twin boys? Whoa! I thought suddenly. Then again I thought Whoa — wait a minute! But, in fact, Whoa! I think we may have just invented a new business — like Rent-a-Kid. Yeah, fuck! Hell, yes! We were really onto something here.

“Janov?” said O'Toole. “Were you even listening to me? This is immensely important, man. I need your help. I helped you. You owe me.”

We could quit this Red Square nonsense and Von Rotten and his stupid Foul Language Movement bullshit and corrupted sloganeering and his twisted handcuff fetishes with my lovely Penny/Helen of our poetry world and all the numbered angels would keep speaking their lovely poetry directly to my mind, and we could go live in peace and prosperity once again and go driving through orange groves in Southern California just to get a whiff of the orange blossoms as we drove through the groves all night with the windows rolled down and a bottle of beer between our legs like we were kids again. Damned kids! Yeah! Kids!

“Hello! Anybody home in there?” asked O’Toole. “Hello?”

