

The Great San Francisco Poetry Wars, 17

by Jerry Ratch

Thus was Rent-a- Rat, Inc born. At first it was Rent-a-Rugrat, but we changed it so the Army wouldn't be onto us. Our first headquarters was out of a damned tent on Red Square, but we would get the hell out of there as soon as we could muster the necessary commitments from single guys all over Berkeley and San Francisco, and from everywhere, really. The idea spread like wildfire, all word-of-mouth. People just showed up at our door. For the first few trial runs, we rented out Penny, of course. Guys went down to the draft board with her in tow. She would purposely wear something that showed off her bulging little midriff, and bam! just like that, they were given an exemption. It was like a miracle.

Until one Sgt. became suspicious. Then we had to start dressing Penny up in various disguises. She had to learn how to put on makeup, for one thing, something she had never really done in her entire life, since she was such a natural beauty. And to help take attention away from her face, Penny started showing more and more cleavage. Ah, leave it to Cleavage, I say! It got right down to the very rims of those lovely wine-dark nipples of hers. That took their rotten Army minds off everything else. They forgot completely about their wars. Ah, yes, our little Helen could trump war any day.

One day we grew experimental and dressed Penny in a flannel shirt, which very nearly killed our little venture dead in its tracks. The Army people didn't like flannel at all. They liked low-cut blouses with cleavage spilling out all over the place. They didn't like anything stinking of hippie in any way, shape, or form. So flannel was out. We quit that immediately. Forget flannel, when it comes to charming the crap out of the Army. Flannel nearly ruined us. Who would've thought?

When Von Rotten heard about the success of our little venture, he immediately staked his claim, saying it was fine with him provided he was acknowledged as the father in the Known World of Poetry (KWIP.) He just couldn't give up on his attachment to Penny, for whatever it was worth, maybe for his own self-image, for all I know. No one really knew the inner workings of this creature's overly big Stalinista ego. It was massive, believe you me.

But O'Toole had started a real ruckus down at the Red Baby Diaper Factory and nearly got us all thrown out. He was punching people left and right, trying to find out where they were keeping his wife hidden inside the bowels of the plant. At one point I saw four Von Rotten minions clinging to his back like barnacles, trying to subdue him, or to get him outside so they could bar the factory door. They even called in the Berkeley police, but the police around those parts weren't so keen on stopping what they called a "domestic dispute." They were more used to intervening in disputes between neighbors assaulting each other with hedge clippers. Or else dousing students with tear gas during demonstrations and riots over war-related matters. That kind of thing they had experience at.

At one point I overheard the angel saying: "*Struggle has ended.*" As soon as it noticed that no one was paying attention, it repeated the phrase: "*Struggle has ended, struggle has ended.*" Still, nothing. I thought I saw the apparition shrug its heavenly shoulders.

Then Angelina emerged from her work room in the back of the factory. She looked at the spectacle and hesitated, but then she went into the reception area and everybody quit struggling. O'Toole straightened himself up, tucking his shirt back into his pants. He plucked his customary hat off the floor, re-creased it, and put it back on the top of his head.

"What do you want from me?" Angelina asked. "Haven't you done enough already?"

"I wanted to let you know I had nothing to do with the great fire at the hotel."

"Fire? What fire?" "

“I didn't start the fire,” O'Toole said. “You've got to believe me.”

Now there was a great silence. Then a horrific sadness fell over Angelina, and she slumped to the ground. The minions rushed to her and tried fanning life back into her. She wasn't dying though. She had only momentarily left this plane of existence. She opened her eyes and then let out a low wail like at funerals all over the earth.

Again I heard voices:

Mystery roar from faraway space detected

Everybody knows whose roar it is

When God opened His hand we scrambled out

It was the beginning of life

We made plans and God laughed

We went on the run

We were like ants on the sun

Angelina rose mysteriously and walked out of the reception room without saying a word. She went back into her mixing room. Ten minutes later she emerged totally naked, but covered in that mysterious red dye of unknown formulation. It covered her breasts, though her nipples showed through the dye like large sad eyes on her chest. And the dye covered her entire pubic area. It was painted on in the shape of a red diaper, precisely, even tied with a big red bow. She looked like a huge baby with tits. Her long straight hair hanging down. She had drawn markings over her face too. She looked like an Apache warrior dressed to kill, dressed for battle, dressed for war and death and newly appointed birth. A dead light lit her eyes. As she approached the reception area everyone in the entire factory was watching. O'Toole collapsed on a hard wooden stool and began blubbering like a baby. Angelina walked over to him and cradled his big graying head of bushy hair in her arms, and while we watched with our mouths open, she fed him her breast.

It was the most heart-wrenching sight I had ever witnessed.

Then at that moment, what looked like a human-sized bubble burst, and the strange see-through shape of Angel 1508 had vanished.

Greg seemed disturbed when I looked at him. His face was flushed a deep red, well even deeper than usual, I should point out, since he had already grown into a pretty serious wino alcoholic by now. So early in life, really.

"The Army's going to get me," he said. "I can feel it in my bones, Janov. They're coming to get me. I'm going to die over there. Fuck. I can just feel it."

"You could go to Canada."

"They're going to get me. Something tells me, like something whispering in my ear. You know what I mean?"

I nodded. Sadly I did know. "Like when you hear a poem as it's being written."

"Exactly. Fuck."

"Why don't you use Penny and her magical belly?"

"Yeah. Helen belly. Look at me, Janov. Look at me! Do I have the appearance of someone who can pull off a lie like that? Well, do I?"

"No, you don't," I had to admit.

"Sheeit. I'm so screwed. Think I need a drink. Tell Von Rotten I quit, would ya?"

"Wait," I said. "Why can't we buy another Pepsi van and get back on the road again? Like old times. Just keep running from them. They'll never find you that way. What do you say? Greg?"

"Have you ever taken a good look at Penny, Janov? You've got no fucking choice in the matter anymore. You are lost, man. Lost. Just go climb back inside that one and hold on for all you're worth. You're in for the ride of a lifetime with her. She...it." Greg stared at Penny for a while, with her tits wobbling inside her camisole. They seemed to be moving of their own volition, just with her breathing. "She is a beauty ... you poor fuck."

Greg wandered out the front door of the factory. It would be quite some time before we would see him again, I felt. If ever.

He was absolutely right. I was a poor fuck, if there ever was one. But not a poor, lonely fuck. That much I knew for sure.

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Penny and I finally got to take a badly needed vacation. We went up to Mendocino where ex-hippies from San Francisco were starting communities to grow their own weed and vegetables and escape the poisons of city life, so they could take off their clothes and lie on their backs on furrowed ground and fuck freely in the sun, if there was any left in the world, or the fog if need be, and raise their children by their own rules without interference by governments of any sort. A place without war. A place without rules and without taxes. A place where you could barter for nearly everything, if you were so inclined, and play music deep into the night and create or avoid any form of religion that you wished. A commune, in other words. Plain and simple.

We wished all of a sudden that we too could live like this. Why couldn't we? This was an alternate lifestyle that was so easy to subscribe to: Live Simply. That's all. To hell with the wars out there in the world, poetry or otherwise. Who cared what happened in this or that writing program, or who got the upper hand on whom? Or what the latest gossip was. Who cared about tenured positions at the institutions of higher learning? Or who was about to become Poet Laureate? We all knew Poet Laureates sucked big wind, big time. Their faces showed up like bloated ex-presidents reading their saccharine and awful works to the weeping world. Exactly who gave a big rat's ass anyway? I, certainly, did not!

Penny found her way immediately in this brave new world. She was, of course, completely used to walking around and posing in front of people without clothes on. No big deal to her if she wandered out of a teepee naked and had to squat over a hole in the ground to take a whiz. Or urging potatoes out of the ground with a forked stick, like one of Van Gogh's Potato Eaters. So what if our faces grew craggy with exposure to the wind and the sun and the

rain, the constant fog that was up there? Ah, yes, that gray ever-present fog. It was there every evening off the sea, and it was still there every morning waiting for the sun to try burning its way through. We went whole weeks without seeing the sun, but when it finally came out, we would race outside and rejoice like we were new-born.

But we missed the city, and the crowds at poetry readings, and people in general. Anyway, it was way too quiet up there in the woods. You could hear things creeping and crawling and snuffling after truffles. Bears roamed the woods freely. The birds were noisier than ever up there. When they managed to pierce that absolute silence, it would startle you. I mean, those creatures never slept. Also, it was a constant trek to get booze. It was like a major daily event to go on a booze run. Forget trying to set up a still. I just wanted to be able to wander down to the local liquor store without creating a major hardship.

So back to Berkeley we went, and started our own commune in a huge rented house on Derby Street where we could tear the fences down in all the neighborhood backyards. We created what we called "The Meadow." We called out to every neighboring rental house full of students from U.C. and ex-students and ex-hippies from the Digger Movement and Haight-Ashbury from the Summer of Love in San Francisco, who were hold-outs from that era. "Take down the fences!" we shouted to anyone who would listen. And they all heard, up and down that block, and ripped down the fences! Thus was "The Meadow" born.

But then the next thing I knew, Von Rotten heard about it and rented a huge house for all his minions right across the expanse of the meadow. We weren't on speaking terms anymore. But the zeitgeist still called for mellowness and non-confrontational behavior, though this made it near impossible to confront problems during disputes and disagreements, and when it came to the very nature at the core of Von Rotten, disputes festered all around his anal little soul.

The trouble really got started when Greg was discovered sitting on his ass in what Von Rotten insisted was "His" garden, as if it was deigned by God or Zarathustra or something. Greg wandered outside one night with his usual jug of Red Mountain rot-gut and his pack of cigarettes and a whole dark blue box of Morton salt, and they discovered him in the bright moonlight singing and smoking and slugging down mouthfuls of wine to wash down the tomatoes he was feasting on.

The Watergate hearings were being broadcast on national TV. Hope for our nation was hanging by a thread. We were all waiting to see what the evil King Richard Nixon was going to do next. None of us felt safe with him in office. It was like a showdown at the OK Corral. It was like a damned soap opera. Was this being scripted? We could not tell anymore what was real from what was not. Boys were still dying in foreign wars we had not asked for. And my good friend Greg was sitting on his ass in the communal gardens of the world wolfing down tomatoes and salt and rot-gut wine, red tomato juice and seeds dripping down the front of his ripped tee shirt.

At one point somebody spotted two Army recruiters with spyglasses hanging out in a tree overlooking The Meadow. It was spooky. It was dreamlike. What did they want out of us anyway? Hadn't we all paid enough dues already? Was this King Richard's plan for us? Were we all going to be spying on each other forever from now on? We knew he was at the beck and call and fawned over the super rich and the war machine, but this was ridiculous! Enough already! Enough!

That was when we decided to paint another huge red square around our block which housed "The Meadow" and declared ourselves a separate country. We decided to secede from the union. And that got the interest of the feds. I swear to you, it was my idea, and Greg's, originally. But Von Rotten just grabbed the chance immediately, saying it was his grand scheme, since he had already painted a red square around the Red Baby Diaper Factory, and when

the television cameras arrived, it was Von Rotten in the eye of the media storm. He was such a gluttonous pig!

From that point on, it was just a matter of time till the showdown over our communal dogs. Let me explain.

