

The Great San Francisco Poetry Wars, 2

by Jerry Ratch

The next day was my faculty trial at Whitebread College, among the vast cornfields of Illinois, and things grew real intense around the campus of that little college. A large crowd of students began to gather around the base of the building that housed the administrative offices, where my hearing was being held. The meeting room was up on the second floor. They ushered me into a room with a long table, around which sat the heads of every department on campus, including the art department, Mitchell Parkman, more or less my only ally on the faculty, at the insistence of his wife Mary Jo, who admired me for some reason I couldn't fathom. Because I wrote poetry maybe, and was different, or so I thought at the time. I saw President Gordon, an old, old man without a chin, occasionally walking over to the window and peering out at the size of the crowd, which kept growing like a stain on the lawn. You could hear shouting voices from below. People held their fists in the air in a gesture of solidarity. It was a serious matter, and kind of scary. With every shout that rose up, heads of the faculty turned and looked at one another. Only Dean Brown seemed unconcerned. He kept thumbing through this stack of memos in a huge file folder in front of him. Here's what had led up to that mess.

Early on in the year when I had arrived, they'd given me an early morning class at 8 a.m. and I wasn't an early morning kind of guy. I was more of a late night poet kind of guy. So when many of the students were having trouble making it to class at 8 a.m., I suggested moving the class to my house and meeting at 8 p.m. in my living room. Brilliant! Almost every student showed up for the 8 p.m. class at my house on College Avenue, and everything seemed to be going great until an old woman from town who was taking my class

(God knows why) complained to the president of the college that I wasn't making my 8 a.m. class on campus. She was apparently an early morning person. And our two worlds simply collided.

President Gordon told Dean Brown to collect data on my malfeasance so they could try me in front of the faculty senate and fire me. And Dean Brown with his crew-cut, button-down Richard Nixon jowls, set about writing memos. Unfortunately Dean Brown, even though he had written these memos on my malfeasance, didn't bother to actually deliver them to me so that I could, you know, *respond* to them. When you write memos, it's probably a good idea to deliver them too. In fact, it ought to be a damned requirement. I'd probably make it that way if I were running the country. But I never really wanted to be President anyway. I'm probably about the only one in the entire United States who didn't, if you want the truth.

"Okay, Dean Brown, why don't you present the evidence against Mr. Janov and let's get on with it," said President Gordon.

Dean Brown shoved the entire folder across the table. "He ignored every one of these messages. He persisted in meeting his 8 a.m. class at 8 p.m. at his house instead of on campus at 8 a.m., even after repeated warnings." He tapped a long finger on the folder and sat back with a pleased smile.

President Gordon looked down his nose over his spectacles. He cleared his throat. "And what do you have to say to the charges, Mr. Janov?"

"Well," I said, "I never got any warnings or messages from Dean Brown. I didn't know this presented a problem. I was meeting my class at my house at 8 p.m. The students' attendance improved dramatically, as did their participation."

"What do you mean? You never got Dean Brown's memos?" President Gordon shoved the folder closer to me. "Here they are."

I opened the folder and thumbed through a few of the memos. They looked official. They were memos all right.

"I never received any of these," I said.

Mitchell Parkman asked the Dean, "Who are these memos written to?"

"Why, to myself and Mr. Janov, of course," answered Dean Brown. "The carbon copies are for Janov."

"But I never got them," I said.

"But I wrote them," said Dean Brown.

"Well," asked Mitchell Parkman, "how did you deliver them exactly?"

"Well, I didn't ... exactly. I wrote the memos covering the situation, as I was instructed to do."

"But, so, you didn't deliver them to Mr. Janov?" Mitchell Parkman had a habit of raising one eyebrow when asking or stating the obvious.

"Well ... no," said the Dean.

"How did you expect him to respond then?"

"Oh, I pretty much knew he wouldn't respond. In fact, I was sure of it. He came from California."

Mitchell Parkman looked around the room at the heads of all the other departments. "Well, I think it's pretty obvious what our course of action has to be."

Nearly all of them nodded their heads in unison.

"We can't afford a lawsuit here," he said. "I move to dismiss the charges."

There was so much silence in the room, except for the shouts from outdoors from the students, that I could hear a woodpecker pecking away at a tree.

"Second," came a weak voice from the other end of the table. It was difficult to tell which one of the heads had said that.

President Gordon's head swung around for a moment.

"All in favor, raise your hands."

One by one the hands went up around the table.

"Looks pretty much unanimous," said Mitchell Parkman. He rose from his chair and extended his hand. "You're free to go, Mr. Janov. Want to go get a beer at Jack's bar?"

The students let out an audible groan when they heard about the dismissal. They wanted to damage something. This would have been their chance to stage a real protest, since they had missed most of the protests against the war in Vietnam so far. But they would get their chance. Not to worry. The troops are always on their way somewhere else. There is always another war.

We all went over to Jack's bar on the town square. Mitchell's wife Mary Jo was already there before us, holding two long tables that had been put together. My "assistant" Allison had to order a diet Pepsi, but the rest of us were drinking bottles of Pabst Blue Ribbon, which I kept ordering in groups of six at a time, so Jack couldn't tell who was old enough. The crowd was too big and disorderly anyway. The afternoon dragged on into the early evening. We'd forgotten completely about eating anything, and things were getting pretty raucous.

Jimmy Pond, another member of the English faculty was there with Ann Hedstrom, the head of the English Department, who had hired me to replace someone on sabbatical for the year. Ann had soft eyes and deep pock marks that spread over her entire face from a terrible bout with acne when she was young. Jimmy Pond was sleeping with her as a result of one drunken night on my living room couch. Jimmy was from New Orleans and had about the longest Southern drawl I'd ever heard in my life. Ann pounced on Jimmy over his loud protestations one night after his wife left him, which had been exactly two days upon their arriving in the cornfields of Illinois from New Orleans, where she'd been raised. She'd simply never heard so much silence in her life, and she ran from it faster than it took for a suitcase full of cockroaches from New Orleans to make themselves at home in their kitchen on the prairie. She had run for her life, possibly the smartest woman in Illinois, or New Orleans, for that matter.

Jimmy was pontificating in his usual Southern manner about writers from the south, when all of a sudden Mary Jo looked at me and squeezed the bottle of mustard she'd been fondling, and suddenly a long arc of mustard shot across the double table, landing

on Jimmy Pond's white shirt. It was like a perfect arc of bright yellow streaking through the air. It couldn't have been a more perfect shot if it had been planned by rocket scientists at Nasa. Not one molecule landed anywhere else but on Jimmy's perfectly laundered and starched white shirt. Jimmy nearly always wore a necktie, because he was a proper New Orleans gentleman who could cook up a mean plate of red beans and rice. You could eat a whole plate of those things without farting once.

Jimmy looked up, startled, then down at his shirt again, to be sure, then back up at Mary Jo. The air flew right out of Mitchell Parkman's mouth. Mary Jo actually had the nerve to laugh out loud. She kept looking over at me, to make sure I knew what this meant. I had no idea whatsoever what it meant.

"Can I see you outside?" she said to me. She got up from the table without another word and went out the front door of the bar. She had the habit of wearing shapeless hippie dresses so you couldn't tell what her body was like. She had four children traipsing along behind her most of the time at home. Mitchell kept her pretty much barefoot and pregnant their entire marriage.

I looked back and forth between Jimmy Pond and Mitchell Parkman. Mitchell shrugged and took a long draught of beer from his glass. Mitchell's secretary, Rosemary, was sitting right beside him. She was a blonde girl with a long nose and a huge chest. She was also their baby-sitter, though not tonight apparently, because this was too big an occasion to miss.

Poor Jimmy was dabbing the mustard off his shirt. Ann Hedstrom kept applying more napkins to the bright yellow squiggle. I walked out the front door of the bar. Mary Jo dragged me by the arm to the curbside.

"See what you made me do?" she said. "By the way, Mitch is fucking that secretary of his, little miss Rosemary with the tits. That's the third one already and I'm sick and tired of having my nose rubbed in it. But I'm sure he's already told you all about it. Everybody in town knows all about it. They always do around here. Fucking little Peyton Place. You better not be leaving town any time

soon. We haven't gotten to know each other yet. Do you ever hear the frogs talking around here? I thought you might. They live in the gutters and when it rains they come out and talk to anyone who'll listen. Have you heard them? I love your poetry, you know. I think you're a great writer, Janov."

She pulled my head down to her face and kissed me hard on the mouth, and she wouldn't let me pull back. Her tongue worked its way into my mouth.

"Don't you go leaving me behind in this unholy little town, you hear?" Mary Jo had a deep appealing voice, with a slight southern St. Louis accent. Her voice was almost husky. It left the impression that she wasn't finished saying everything she had to say.

A brightness entered my eyes when she kissed me. Something lit up in my future. But the next day my students drove me out to a used car lot on Route 66, and I bought that red, white and blue Pepsi van, and by the end of the week we were off to the West Coast on our 3000 mile trip.

