

The Great San Francisco Poetry Wars, 7

by Jerry Ratch

But maybe things could change, I thought. I'll just try it out and see how it goes with her kids. Maybe things would work out. Just how bad could it get?

You have no idea, that's all I can say. Take it from me. No idea.

Steve Bancroft took over my room and Greg came by to help me move my things. Penny came home to find me coming out of the house with my last box.

"Where are you moving?"

"Up into the hills."

"Well ... why? I thought..."

"He's pussy-whipped," Greg laughed. "P-U-S-S-Y whipped." He guffawed, looking at me. "Well? It's true. Are you gonna stand there and deny it?"

I hung my head.

"And she's got four kids yet," Steve added. "Four damned kids! He has no idea what he's in for." Steve and Greg were socking each other in the arm.

Penny watched me squirming. "I can baby-sit," she said. "Call me." She touched my arm above the wrist and I felt the life force leap from her body.

What the hell was I doing? I was throwing my life away!
Ah, me!

After getting moved into the house with Mary Jo, things starting getting desperate almost immediately, in terms of how we were going to survive. When we went down into town for a load of groceries in this green VW square-back she'd just bought, the entire back end of that little van was loaded to the roof with bags full of groceries. It cost upwards of fifty bucks. I had never in my life seen

such a huge bill at the store. And to make matters worse, by the next day those kids had eaten their way through well over half of what we had brought into the kitchen. That meant we would have to go back down for more the next day, or the day after at best. It was like feeding a small army, because having four kids meant there were always at least two other kids visiting from the neighborhood. I watched the food flying from the table like it had come back to life and spread wings.

And that wasn't the worst of it. I was trying to write my long poem, Puppet X. I took to drinking Jack Daniels Black Label late into the night to get some concentration. I didn't have a desk, so I would spread my note cards out across our bed, which was just a mattress thrown on the floor. One night we were naked fucking right on top of my note cards. With her legs stirring above my back in the air as I lunged into Mary Jo, suddenly the kids pushed open the door and came bursting into the room. The screaming from everybody reached an ear-splitting pitch, and of course that was the last time we did that before they were all fast asleep.

Then there was the necessity for me to go out and find a job. Any job. Whatever it took to help feed that mob, and that was where the real fun began. Because we had just then started into one of our country's infamous recessions, and work became scarce. I had to go out and beg for whatever menial job I could find. And it was bad out there, let me assure you.

At that exact moment, on top of everything else, there was a student protest over the war in Vietnam. The protest had spread from the campus at the University into the streets, and windows had been smashed at the stores in downtown Berkeley along Shattuck Avenue and up and down University Avenue. Windows were all boarded up the first morning I went out to find a job at hardware stores, stationary stores, anything I could find. Everything had spray paint covering it with graffiti. "Peace now!" and "U.S. out of Vietnam!" The usual. Greg was no doubt among that crowd, shouting and drinking red wine. Who knows? Warren Jeffries had called me on the phone the night before and said, "Listen to this," as

he held the receiver out his bedroom window at the noise coming from the riot on campus. They were spraying gas over People's Park, trying to get them to disperse.

"Are you kidding?" they told me at one of the stores on Shattuck Avenue. "Look around. Does it look like we're open for business here?" The windows were boarded over. It was dark inside. There was broken glass all over the merchandize. They were sweeping up.

"What are you, nuts?"

"I'm just desperate."

"Get the heck out of here. You better shave off that beard, if you expect to get any kind of a job around here — after this. Damned hippy love-nut good-for-nothing peaceniks. Go on, get out!"

I began driving down along University Avenue, stopping at every store big or little that was open, looking for any kind of work. When I ran out of stores along that strip, I turned north along San Pablo Avenue, which was one of the longest streets in the world. They had every kind of store and business you could imagine along that street. And I stopped in almost every one of them. Hamburger havens, car sales, vacuum cleaner repair shops, mom and pop stores, big stores, little, it didn't matter. Finally I stopped in at MacDonald's and thought about applying there, but wolfed down two burgers, a fries and a chocolate shake instead, and then kept on going north until I got to the border of El Cerrito near the El Cerrito Plaza. There I noticed a tall sign that was sticking up near the freeway, adjacent to the bay, on the far side of Albany Hill. It read: White Front Stores. And that was where I headed.

Little did I know that this would become my first job in California. I started part time, twenty-five hours a week, at \$1.92 per hour, without benefits. It wasn't much, but it was food on the table for us. Though first, I would have to scrape and beg to get that job. But by the time I got there I'm sure my sense of desperation showed through. And I knew it too. So, I let down my guard and began to grovel like a dog on the floor. It wasn't a pretty sight, and it wouldn't be my last time.

Major Jowles was the name of the store supervisor, the man who relented after I was finished groveling. He was retired from the Air Force in World War II and had nearly been killed by a propeller. It had made his eyes pop out permanently. I told him I was desperate for work. That my wife was pregnant (a flat out lie) and that I would do anything, just try me. I can do it, I promised.

He checked me up and down and shrugged his shoulders.

"What the hell," he said, "we'll give you a try. The pay is \$1.92 an hour. You'll start the evening shift as box-boy. Twenty-five hours a week is all we can offer, on account of any more than that and we'd have to give you benefits, and we're not going to be giving out no benefits. Okay?"

I nodded. Okay? I was thrilled!

"Now, go see Maurice, he's in the back, down the hallway here. He'll be telling you what to do. He's a Teamster. He does all the unloading on the dock back there, but that's all he does. Everything else is your job. When he goes to lunch, you cover for him. Okay, you're on the clock. Good luck."

"When do I start?" I asked.

"I just punched a timecard for you. You're on the clock. What don't you understand about on the clock? Now go."

Major Jowles was about fifty-five or sixty years old. He was short and pudgy with graying bushy eyebrows that made him look constantly surprised.

He looked surprised right now. "Are you still here?"

I jumped up out of the chair. My feet started moving quicker than my upper body would allow me to go. I was nearly leaning backwards as I turned the corner to get down the hallway back to the stockroom behind the huge discount store, which was filled with the world's largest, most complete collection of useless crap you could ever want or possibly imagine in your most awful nightmare. Listerine, toys, Band-aids, boxes of Kotex, goldfish. And there I was, the store's new box-boy, gliding past the junk of America.

If anything broke on one of the aisles out front in the store, I was the one they called, the one who was responsible for getting a mop and cleaning it up. If they needed more bags at the checkout counters, it was me who flew to get them. If they needed more shopping carts, I ran outside into the immense parking lot next to the constant roar of the freeway and shagged them in, long lines of them like a freight train, like Calistoga Wagons. And, joy of them all, if someone couldn't make it to the toilet in time, the call came for me and my mop. Code 33. That was me: Code 33M or 33B. Bring the mop, 33M being code for Mop, 33B meant bring the Broom. And don't be late.

33B I didn't mind so much. At least I knew it was a dry spill, bring the broom and the dustpan. But those 33M's, that could be nasty, as the first night showed me right off.

I met the Teamster, Maurice, as soon as I wandered back into the warehouse. Maurice was about my age, younger actually, couldn't have been more than twenty-five. He was wiry, medium height, a Hispanic guy. He seemed very nice. I didn't see how he could handle the weight of that job, unloading all the pallets of junk off the huge semi's that kept pulling in to the loading docks. Though he did no work without a forklift.

"So, you're the new box-boy, huh?" he said to me, looking me up and down, shaking his head. "Boy, they sure had a hard enough time finding us one. Last guy, he cut out of this place must have been a damn month ago already. And we got Christmas coming up in half a year. Boy, look out for that. Whelp, I'm real glad you're here.

"Now, see that pile of twisted black and white clothes hangers?" he said.

I looked toward where he pointed. There was the biggest stack of twisted plastic hangers I had ever seen in my life. They were all dumped together and spilling out of one enormous mother of all boxes. This was bigger than any box I'd ever seen. It looked like they could have shipped a bulldozer in it.

"Yeah?" I said, looking back at Maurice. "What a mess!"

“Sort them,” he said. “Separate them onto these moveable racks by size, and keep the blacks from the white. Just like life, ain't it? And hurry up, the department managers keep coming back here looking for them — as if I'm going to do something about it! Funny, ain't it? They've been getting pretty ornery about having to come back here and sort through these things themselves. I'm going on my coffee break. Welcome aboard. And just in case I don't get around to saying it in the future, Merry fucking Christmas! Wait until that gets here. You won't believe what you're in for. Ho, ho, ho!”

He grabbed a pack of cigarettes and disappeared, and I was alone in a warehouse with fifty or seventy-five foot ceilings. Over the loudspeaker, people kept shouting things like: “Sporting Goods manager to the front checkout counter number nine. Sporting Goods, price check on nine. Price check, Sporting Goods!” and so on.

I began sorting through some of the hangers. They were pretty entangled, because the metal clips along the part where you hung clothes would catch onto other hangers and wouldn't let go easily. Normally a job like this would take the better part of the life of an octopus to disengage. This wasn't the type of thing a man with any sort of brain at all would want to get near. And yet, there I was. And I had begged to get here too, all at a brisk \$1.92 an hour, without benefits. But hey, who cares about benefits? We were talking about a little wine and hot dog money, not prime rib and horseradish or anything. It wasn't like I was about to buy another bottle of Jack Daniels right away. I had a damned job in the U.S of fucking A. Hey, hey, hey!

After his fifteen minutes was up, all of a sudden Maurice came running into the warehouse, yelling, “Hey, didn't you hear over the intercom? 33M! 33M! That's you! 33 means you. And *M* means bring the mop and bucket. They got a big mess in the hallway to the johns. Some lady couldn't make it all the way back to the bathroom. Now, here's your mop and bucket. Go ahead and get out there before they fire your skinny ass.”

It's hard to describe what I found when I got there. In the hallway leading back to the bathrooms, there was a swinging door midway down the hall. The woman hadn't been able to hold herself until she got all the way back to the ladies room, and she let loose right there at the swinging door. Apparently she'd had the runs. So, the swinging door had managed to spread a sheet of diarrhea over a good fifteen or twenty square feet of floor, possibly more, and the hallway had no ventilation. So, the stench in that hallway was just about enough to make a Shetland pony from Missouri gag.

The store secretary spotted me standing there, gawking at this mess. Someone else had walked right through it, tracking it on their footsteps out to the front desk where Major Jowles would normally sit. Of course, he left the store and told the secretary to get it cleaned up. Apparently they'd been yelling 33M! 33M! into the loud speaker for a good ten minutes already. I had managed to block the noise out while I stood sorting through those nasty black and white hangers back in the warehouse.

The secretary was a young girl, a high school graduate maybe, maybe not. She was a pretty girl with long straight dark hair, but with sharp pointy swept-back features that made her look hard.

"You're the new box-boy? Where have you been sleeping? Get in there and clean that mess up. Make it quick, before someone falls in it and gets hurt."

"It smells," I said. "I'm not going down that hall."

"You're 33M, aren't you?"

"Well, yes, I guess so."

"Then get in there and mop it up, or else punch your time card and go the fuck home." The secretary looked me up and down one time. "Are you waiting for ah graved invitation?"

I looked down that hallway into the imaginary brown fumes of hell. I thought about my writing career. I thought about my future life with Mary Jo and her kids. I thought about my day of driving from store to store looking for work. There wasn't a whole lot more to think about. I took the deepest breath I could, pulled the

mop out of the bucket of water on wheels, and began swabbing the deck.

That was Night One. There was a ways to go until Christmas. Ho, ho, ho. It was still mid-summer. I began dreaming about Shakespeare.

My second night on the job, I was sorting through the hangers in the warehouse and really getting somewhere, when this short wiry guy with a heavy eight or nine o'clock shadow on his face, came running into the warehouse, looking around wildly. "Hey, you!" he shouted. "Where the hell is that damned Teamster, Maurice, sloughing off again? You're the new box-boy, aren't you? Oh, boy! Well, fine, come with me."

He turned and started on a trot out to the floor in front. "C'mon!" he shouted at me, when he noticed me hesitating. "The bigwigs are coming! The bigwigs are coming!"

"What do you want me to do about it?"

"I want you to face the toys!"

"What?" I asked. I thought I had misheard him. "Face the toys?" I conjured up really huge, towering toys in my mind, all of a sudden. That I would have to be facing them, I mean. How big could toys get, I wondered?

"C'mon, c'mon!" he said. "We don't have all night."

He trotted me out to the toy department. All was chaos out there. Very little seemed to be left on the shelves. Things were spilled out of the boxes onto the aisle. Little kids of every race sat on their butts in the middle of everything, bawling their eyes out. Their mothers were nowhere in sight. Snot was running out of their noses. Abruptly one of them would quit crying, pick up a toy that was out of a box, shake it, hold the thing up to his ear, then abruptly burst into tears again, and that would get the others going. It was pandemonium. I thought about running back to the jungle of black and white clothes hangers, which now seemed sane by comparison.

"Okay," Mr. Toy Department Head told me, "pick all this stuff off the floor and put them at the back of the shelf, like this." He scooped up an armload of the open boxes and dolls and fire engines

and threw them onto the shelf. "Then you pull the unopened boxes to the front, see, and make them all face forward. Face them! Get it? I want you to face the fucking toys." He kind of whispered the word "fucking." He looked around to see if there were any witnesses. Kids were looking up at him. "Face the toys, like I said."

When he was done, all you saw from the front was a nice orderly-looking shelf. It was amazing. Of course, utter chaos reigned behind the lines. He leered in toward me closely and made an insane happy face.

"The Big One called from the airport," he said in a conspiratorial whisper. "They're up from L.A. They're on their way over here right now. Our ass is on the line if we don't get this department straightened out." He pulled a hankie out of his back pocket and mopped his brow. "So, let's get this stuff faced and make it snappy. I'm going for supper. I'll be up at the snack bar. Let me know when you're done with things. You've got maybe twenty minutes, half hour max. Don't leave until you're done. Listen, what was your name again?"

"Philip." I extended my hand. Mr. Toy Department simply looked at it and shrugged.

"They didn't issue you a nametag? Boy, they've got confidence, don't they? We'll call you X. If you're here past X-mas, we'll see about a real name. Good luck. Oh, and throw a broom on the aisle when you're done."

The man turned on his heels and fled up the aisle like a broken field quarterback runner.

