

# The Puppet Maker

*by* Jerry Ratch

My sister Janis called me from Berlin and said to turn on the news. You could see the thick flurries of snow that were falling there and the flat feathers of peoples' breaths issuing from their mouths as they took turns swinging pick-axes, standing on top of the Wall. I remember distinctly the colorful graffiti sprawled across the face of it. I never did catch the clip with my sister in it, but she was nevertheless there when it first began. I told my partner, Curt, and he said to bring along this little portable I had so we could watch it on TV, because it was getting on into the heavy selling season and we had to stay out on Telegraph Avenue until way after dark.

Every evening on the news we would see pictures of the bonfires burning all night beside the Berlin Wall. It was in November, fifty years after Germany invaded Poland, that they started pulling down the Wall which separated East Germany from the West. Piece by piece it came apart. With real determination the work kept on by hand, with pick-axes — not with programs, not with bulldozers, not with dynamite. No government was behind it, no official party could claim responsibility, it was just the will of the people.

The work was slow but steady, and they kept right on until the job was completed. They weren't expecting a paycheck. As compensation they gained their freedom. All over the world you could feel the tension, and at the same time the thrill of it running through the air like an electrification of man's psyche. In the same way the literal jazz of it seemed to run up and down Telegraph Avenue.

That was where I worked at the time, selling these extravagant, hand-built puppets with this guy named Curt Lazare. He was truly the master of these things. I wasn't exactly his partner,

he just made me feel like I was. Truth was, I was only his assistant. He'd built up his trade over the years with very little help from anyone else. However, he had a physical problem with his right arm, so after a time as his business improved, it became a requisite to hire on someone who could work with their hands, and who had the right sort of temperament to go out and sit day after day along Telegraph Avenue.

I remember stopping by his stand one day a number of years back, never mind how many, admiring the craftsmanship of the handiwork. I guess I'd always had a fascination with puppets. I made a comment to him about the relationship of man and puppet, how closely we resembled one another when it came to politics and the forces that put us through our motions, as if we ourselves were really only human-sized puppets. For some reason, this seemed to strike a chord between us, and within days I was sitting next to him at the stand, hired on as his apprentice. It was one of those jobs you just fall into. It seemed comfortable enough at the time, and I didn't feel any particular pressure to move on. And there to my surprise I remained for most of the Eighties, while the world sped crazily past. The word "yuppie" was coined at that time, and met its death there too.

When things started happening in Berlin in November of 1989, my sister Janis was traveling through Europe with a friend of hers, a Jewish girl named Nina who, it turned out, became my girlfriend. They came back all excited, telling us of enormous changes that were sweeping across the continent. Something was in the wind, they said, and it was really happening now and nothing, it seemed, was about to stop it. But I have to say, there were more than a few eerie moments of déjà vu that came drifting along with those images of bonfires burning at night beside the Wall. Even as it was disappearing brick by brick, I couldn't shake off the old images that had been etched into my mind of the bonfires at Nazi rallies in Nuremberg prior to World War II. Nina as well admitted one night to the mixture of emotions she felt, the exhilaration, and yet at the same time her fears about being right there in Berlin at that

particular moment, because of the huge number of skinheads they had running around.

I had a hard time shaking off the nightmarish images of the huge piles of bodies being bulldozed into massive pits during the Holocaust. "Where was God?" they had cried, looking up from that hollow land. The infinite skies were silent. But it was a question that my own sister had asked once that has stuck most strongly in my mind to this day. It was, I think, the final question. The ultimate question was: "Where was man?"

My sister was totally absorbed then in the exploration of the Slavic side of our nature, the European roots of the Forster family, how we got here to America, and why. She had just recently come out to California after spending a number of years in Colorado in a disastrous relationship with an older man who had prematurely white hair and, it turned out, was married. And much older than he'd originally told her. Then he'd kept stringing her along for another couple of years with the promise of getting a divorce. But it never happened. Ultimately she was crushed, humiliated and defeated by him.

But she had that moody Slavic persistence and courage in her blood, a kind of inner will that holds in its grasp a strange mixture of darkness and light at the same time, which we used to depend on so much when we were younger. The same kind of inner will that fueled the Velvet Revolution the previous year in Prague, which gave something back, I like to think, to mankind.

She summoned up her strength and one day walked out on her white-haired lover, and she took a trip to Europe to clear the creep out of her system. Then out she came to Berkeley, since I was already here, to pick up the pieces of her life and start over again at the age of thirty-three. And that was where she was destined to meet this curious fellow, Curtis Lazare, with whom I was working, making his puppets.

Mostly it was rich people from the hills who came down to the Avenue to buy our hand-made puppets for their children. They were quite intricate. Maybe they were an art form, I don't know, but

over the years they'd grown to be quite expensive. Sometimes rich folks from the town of nearby Piedmont would hear about them by word of mouth, and they'd drive over to buy one of these things, when they could work up the nerve to come into Berkeley. You could always recognize someone from Piedmont by the gold chains they wore, and the expensive cut of the clothes. They all dressed the same — tons of gold, not necessarily in good taste either, just lots of it. That's a good way to die in Berkeley, flashing that kind of thing. If the thieves didn't get you, one of the politicians would. They love twisting the symbol right off the front of a Mercedes Benz around here.

Telegraph Avenue could be a pretty unsettling experience, I imagine, if you were used to the luxury and security of a town like Piedmont. They have their own police force over there to keep the riffraff out. There was one thin, elegant-looking woman with dyed blonde hair who would drive up now and then in a new BMW and buy up the entire lot of puppets. Whatever we had on hand, she'd buy. We never were able to figure out what kind of schedule she was on, if any, so that we might adjust our production to it. There was no regularity to her behavior at all, far as we could tell. And she never gave either one of us a hint.

It was impossible to tell what nationality she was; could have been a mixture of anything. She was very mysterious; intriguing too, I had to admit. Every time she made a purchase and drove off in her BMW loaded with our puppets sitting beside her, we would look up at the heavens and thank the gods watching over us, the gods of the arts, or whatever other gods there were, and we would go out and celebrate as you must whenever you have a success.

Curt and I took turns minding the booth, except during the holidays, when we both had to be there selling puppets in the cold, sunshine or rain, out on Telegraph. That pretty much ate up the daylight. You had to get out there exactly while the sun was rising if you wanted to get a good space along the Avenue and not be way the hell down near Cody's Books or something. If you were down

that far, you might as well pack up the cart and take the day off; go shoot pool or have a couple of beers. Least, we used to be able to do that once in a while and not worry about things so damn much.

But with all the bad inflation that hit the economy in the eighties, it just grew to be nearly impossible to slack off and rest once in awhile, so it seemed like all we ever ended up doing was to push and keep on pushing it. Curt would look at me and he'd say it straight out: "We've got to go for it, Mickey. I got no choice. Let's push it a little today."

It got so that's all there ever was to life anymore. Used to be, hell, it used to be we could enjoy living. We could all get by only working half time; that's all it ever took. What the hell went wrong? I'll tell you what — it was that dick Richard Nixon, way back when, that's what. That's where things all started going the wrong direction. I remember how it was before that dick came along, and it was different. Way different. That's what happens, I guess, when you let one man with a twisted heart piss things up for you. They keep taking rifles to the wrong ones — that's if you want my opinion, which no one I know seems to want.

Well, this one day I was over to pick up Curt (where he was still living with his wife) because it was so close to Christmas and we were running way behind in production. This was mainly my fault, I'd had such a bad case of the flu the week before. I felt bad about it and wanted to make up for lost time, but I had to admit, earlier my sister Janis had reminded me that this was the winter solstice, which was the shortest day of the year, in terms of daylight. But that also meant that it would be the longest night; and the good thing about that was there would be a bonfire and a hell of a party at Peoples' Park, right off Telegraph Avenue. My sister was anxious to go over there and dance all night beside the fires, to commune in spirit with our European counterparts who were gathering the threads of their own liberation, without tanks or guns, right now at this same moment on the other side of the world. I was real torn, frankly, because now and then the thought of dancing all night with

Nina beside the fires at the park came into mind. And maybe crawling into a hot tub with her under the stars.

But the fact was, we had to make up for things since we'd been set back so much on account of the flu. If you lost time prior to the best selling season there was on this planet, the Christmas crunch, when all the moms and dads were being squeezed so heavily into tossing their money at the kids — well, that meant you were just about going to be jack-out of business, that's all, because the rest of the year was practically speaking a big practical joke. Who in hell's going to be buying puppets in the middle of the spring, or the summer, for that matter? I mean, no one, that's who. The fast and loose attitudes of the eighties were over already, and a bad recession was coming on, and I think we all of us knew it along the Avenue.

I got a real fright when I first noticed Curt, he was so consumed with things. I had turned the corner on my way over to picking him up and pulled over to the curb a few doors from his house, and I shut off the ignition. To my surprise I thought I recognized this tall, thin man leaning against the lamp-post at the corner. I stayed put in the car. Sometimes it could be dangerous if you just surprised somebody you didn't know around there. I looked back over my shoulder to keep an eye on him. It was night and for some reason the streetlight wasn't working, so I couldn't be dead certain that it was Curt at all. There stood this man in a leather bomber jacket, smoking a cigarette and looking off a little toward something I honestly couldn't see.

Twisting around in my seat, I strained so hard to see if it was him or not that I got a cramp in the tendon in my neck and had to sit there for about five minutes, massaging my neck to get rid of it. I looked at the car clock, it was making such a racket. I drove an old Mercedes I'd bought for a song from a guy who was leaving the country. The car was twenty-two years old. The springs were shot and the bottom scraped the intersection every time I hit the dip at a street corner, and the clock was one of those old electric kinds that kept running and running and never seemed to just quit. Germans

were real proud of that kind of thing, but the noise it made would drive you nuts. It was only 6:00 p.m. and already it was pitch black out.

Pretty soon my eyes got used to seeing in the dark, and I had to make sure it was Curt leaning against the lamp-post in the pure dark like that, just leaning against the post, smoking a cigarette, taking the white thing off his lips now and then, then back again. Occasionally he would point with it at something, off a little, like he was talking to someone maybe across the street over toward where I was parked, but there was honestly no one that I could see. He was, like, discussing things. But with nobody there — that was what concerned me the most.

You only got that way when you were about to go nutso, far as I knew. And I, for one, could not afford for this guy to move off his handle very far. It was important that he kept a grip on things. Only he knew, really, how to go about making these things that kept us going, his puppets. They were totally of his own making and design. I only helped him get through the physical parts of it. They were way too complicated otherwise.

I watched him seemingly talking to himself, or to someone else, for about as long as I could take it, then I got out of the car and wandered across the street. Right away I noticed him stop gesturing. He took the cigarette out of his mouth and tossed it in the gutter, and he watched me come up to him.

"Curt?" I asked. "That you?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"What you doing out here? It's colder than shit."

"I know it, Mick. It is that."

"Were you waiting for me long? I ain't late, am I? You said six o'clock."

"Yes, I know."

"What is it, Curt?"

Curt looked over across the street again at something and didn't answer. It was pretty damn cold out. I could see the both of us breathing through our mouths. I shivered inside my jacket and

turned up the collar, and it was a leather one and had a good lining too. It was just that it was so damp out. You could hear the distant roar of a jet heading off across the sky toward the east. Straight up over our heads I could see where the icy moon was caught in the bare branches of a big tree, staring right down at us. I got a whiff of the tobacco and a taste for something occurred in my mouth. I didn't smoke normal cigarettes anymore, I'd quit the things about a year before, but I felt like I could use something right then. I took a good look down the sidewalk that went past his house. "C'mon, Curt, let's go put some work in, what do you say?"

He took another look toward his house. "I got to wait a second more here, Mick. Maybe you better go on ahead of me."

"I ain't no good in the shop without you, you know that," I said. "I'd be standing there with my thumb up my bum."

He nodded his head, but he didn't move. He kept looking across the street at his damn house.

"What the hell is it, Curt?" I asked. "I'm getting the willies standing here. It's too fucking cold out. Can't we at least go sit in the car and get the heater going?"

He nodded again. That was the first positive sign of life. We stepped off the curb and crossed the street to my car and got in. I started up the motor and cranked the heater up top volume. After a minute it blew the frost off the front window. Curt kept staring out toward where his house was.

"Want some dope?" I asked. But he just looked over at me for a brief second, then back out through the windshield.

"Come on, Curt. What the fuck is it?" I said.

"She's seeing someone."

Oh, b-Jesus, I thought. Oh, hell. This was it. "Jesus," I said.

"Don't use that term around me, Mick. That isn't so funny."

"What term?" I said, surprised. "I didn't use any kind of term."

"That Jesus stuff, like that."

"What do you mean?" I asked.



"That's where she met the guy. At a church. She says she's just going to Mass. Mass my ass!" he said. I couldn't help bust out laughing at the rhyme he made out of it, because he used to write, so I thought for a second that we were getting some kind of longer sight on the thing here. But I was dead wrong. I slowed down real fast when I saw the gravity moving over his face.

"You're serious," I said.

He just nodded his head. "I was waiting to see when she comes out the door. He's already here. It's no big deal. I just wanted to see them together."

"How do you know, about it, I mean?"

"I can smell him on her," Curt said. Then he went real quiet and shrunk down into the leather of the seat that squeaked with the withdrawal of the man's spirit. You could see him actually pull it down inside himself. I'd seen him do it before. He could swallow it down and let everything just sit deep down inside. That's not good for you. Once in awhile you've got to let it out or you'll explode. But he wouldn't let things out so easily, until it was too late. And all of a sudden I could feel the bottom of my own stomach settling around my kneecaps.

I'd seen him do the same exact thing against his own body, for God's sake. It wasn't very often that I would witness the anger he had at his body, that it wouldn't do what he wanted, I mean. But on occasion you'd see it if you watched him long enough, which I had the chance to do in the business of making puppets. But then, just as suddenly, he would cap it off, that anger, just as quickly as it arose. He would bottle it up inside. And then you could see it as if it were plainly riding around inside him, as if he were a clear container and you could see right into him. Other than that problem with his arm, he wasn't a bad looking guy. I know a lot of women who've done a lot worse than him.

At any rate, that's no way to live, in my opinion. There's got to be some release in life. Some way out.

Finally he said something that was peculiar for him. Or maybe it was the sound of his voice that was peculiar. It came from

way back in his throat. "They're doing more than praying together," he growled.

He remained quiet for some time. Then he said, almost in a whisper, "I had a lot of opportunities that I let go by, Mick. It's funny. That's what pisses me off. It's not love or anything. That died a long time ago. It's not that."

Then something happened. I saw a stoop-shouldered man come out of his driveway, and without thinking I reached across and grabbed hold of Curt, to hold him back. It was an instinct.

"Don't do nothing rash," I said.

Curt — he looked at me like I'd hurt him or something. I looked down and that was when I realized I had grabbed hold of the wrong arm. Immediately I let go of it. My hand actually jerked back off his arm like I'd been burned.

"Sorry, Curt," I said. I shook out my hand, apologizing. "Who the hell was that?" I asked.

"Homeless," Curt said. He rubbed his arm a little. There was practically speaking no muscle in the thing. It felt like you were grabbing the arm of a dead man, when you did something like that. It was a real surprise.

"What?" I asked. "You mean a homeless guy? Back of your house?"

"Yeah, he's homeless, sort of. He sleeps in the garage. I pretend I don't know."

"Are you crazy, Curt?"

"Long as he doesn't do anything . . . I mean, I take the damn trash out back there."

He shrugged, holding up his good hand. I looked over at him in the little bit of light we had from the dashboard lights. "Sometimes I leave a couple cans of beans out in the garage. An old blanket. Susan doesn't know anything about it, so don't you say anything. Okay, Mick? It's not hurting anybody. There's a roof there, it leaks a little, but it's okay. Better than nothing at all," he said. "You know?" He smiled at me.

"I've been thinking of telling Susan to throw out the trash herself," he said. "Someday soon. I never turn the light on when I go back there. I can feel him watching me. I've gotten used to it. Susan is afraid of the dark. I know she would turn on the light." At that, he actually laughed. And I thought to myself: Okay! We're not going in to work anymore tonight. We're going to the park.

"Curt," I said. "I've got somebody over at People's Park I want you to meet. I don't really want to go work tonight."

There was nothing. There was no reaction from him, and I thought I saw him twist in the car seat, and heard the seat leather again. He continued to look straight out the window.

Finally he said something. "It's okay, Mick. If you want to, go ahead."

"Why don't you come with me, Curt?"

"I can't, Mick. I've got some unfinished business here." Then he looked over at me. He looked empty. Real empty. Still he smiled, you understand. But right at the edge of his smile, there was pain. That was when his wife Susan came out of their house, looking all dressed up. She came down the steps, hurrying, and a door opened on a car that was right in front. And suddenly Curt got out of the car. He looked back in at me. "See you, Mick," he said, and he slammed the door.

"Wait a minute, Curt," I yelled, and I too jumped out of my car.

Already he was at the driver's side of the black car. The door opened and a man popped out, right in his face, and stood there leering at him.

"I wouldn't even think about it, if I was you," the guy said. He wasn't as tall as Curt, but he looked like he could handle himself. I came around to the driver's side and took up a position behind Curt.

"Oh, you need reserves?" the man sneered. "We're going to church, you know?" he said, looking over Curt's shoulder at me.

I said nothing.

"Can't take care of your own battles, Curt?" he said. He didn't have a hat on and you could see the guy was beginning to go bald on the top. He wore one of those dense Joseph Stalin mustaches, and his eyes looked black.

"C'mon, Vic," said Curt's wife from inside the car. "We've got to get to church. C'mon, get back in the car. He won't do anything. He's harmless."

I took Curt by his good arm and pulled him straight back away from the man's car. I kept on pulling him up the sidewalk, until we were a good fifty feet from his house.

"I'm taking you along with me tonight, Curt. We're going to the celebration at People's Park. I want you to meet someone there. C'mon. Let's get the fuck out of here."

Curt let me pull him towards my car. I could feel the lack of resistance. It was like he kept getting lighter and lighter.

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It was late that night that I could see something coming to a simmer between Curt and my sister Janis. It had started slowly at first, a kind of slow smoldering wisp of something, like you might see off in a field. Then a little burst, a flame, mostly it was transparent, like something seen in the sunlight.

When it happened, I was right there.

It was after some time had passed. We'd been dancing our butts off on the grass in the cold night air, under the moon in the park, with the bonfire casting enormous jagged-edged shadows all around us. We stopped dancing for a spell. Sweat was steaming off our bodies, when slowly, like he was pulling a sliver out of his soul, Curt said to my sister, "I haven't enjoyed myself this much in a dozen years. I feel like I'm coming back to life again. You've helped me come alive. Where have you been all my life, Janis?" She laughed, a flirting kind of laugh, I thought. "Listen," he said, "would you mind if I asked you something, kind of personal?"

Janis laughed softly then, smiling with her eyes. She was quite a bit shorter than him. Tonight she wore her long dark hair tied back in a ponytail, and she had on tight-fitting Levis. She could be very pretty, alluring.

"Go ahead," she said. "I'm all ears."

"Would you pose for me, Janis?"

"Pose? What do you mean, pose as a model?"

"Yes. As a model, sort of." Curt gathered himself up almost formally. "I'd like to make a puppet of you," he said.

Janis took a good step back and thought about his proposal for a minute. I could see her looking at him, up and down, sizing him up. She put a finger to the edge of her mouth, something she would do on occasion when she was thinking. "I'll agree to it," she said. "But on one condition."

"What's that?" Curt asked.

"That you model for me."

Janis peered right at him. She had large, deep-set eyes. Curt glanced over at me, but I just shrugged. What they did between them was their business, I figured. They were adults. I never took it upon myself to feel possessive in the least when it came to my sister. She was an individual, same as me. Free, female, and thirty-three. And this was Berkeley, where that maybe meant something once.

"You make art?" he asked.

Janis nodded her head. "I've been doing some painting."

"Agreed," he said.

"Okay," said Janis. "When do we begin?"

"How about right now?" Curt said. "This is a very good night to begin."

They looked at each other for a long time, it seemed. Then they both grinned widely, like school-children.

In unison they said it. "Why not?"

