

Dear Larry,

4/8/73

Because this is my 60th birthday, I hope you will tolerate not one but two special favors I will ask of you: try to find an old friend and do no story if you do without his o.k. The reason for the second request will become clear.

Before I forget, the Kill Castro recommendation by Hunt made the front page of The Times of London. Unlike the Lead Zeppelin, it thereafter made no sound audible in the U.S. I'd hoped for some feedback. Apparently no reporter thought it was new or no desk agreed.

I'm surprised not to have heard from you once it was known that Bud is in some areas only McCord's attorney. Just as good, because I haven't seen Bud since before it became known and he didn't mention it the last time I saw him.

It may seem unlikely, but the death of Picasso reminds me of this old friend who, when last I heard of him, was in Chicago and having a very hard time of it, particularly because he had been a Congressman. He is John Bernard, originally a Corsican who settled in Eveleth, Minn., in the Mesabe country, as I recall, and became first a union leader and then a popular leader. He was elected to Congress in New Deal days. Lasted until the Catholic Church really decided to get him.

Of his many unorthodox Congressional exploits, the one I remember best is singing on The Floor. Don't think it was done before or has been since. There was this fascist Congressman from Montana, a real, actual Silver Shifter, too. One day Johnny had had it. So, he got up and sang to Thorkelson, "Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Wolf?"

There is, if you'll pardon and I hope enjoy, another digression for Johnny and songs, in this case also currently popular and it would seem topical. Lil's Uncle Buck found a ham he'd forgotten he had. It was at least five year old because he had been away from the home in the meathouse of which he found it for that long. He mentioned finding it and I salivated. But he wouldn't sell it because he feared it had spoiled. I finally talked him out of it. It was hard as a rock. However, one of Lil's considerable culinary skills is doing justice to Old Hams (years of experience, did you say?). It was without doubt the best ham ever. We had Johnny and another left-wing Congressman over for dinner after we tasted it and knew what it was. Second, Vito Marcantonio. We then lived in a black ghetto. It was before air conditioning, summertime and hot. In the heart of D.C. We had all the windows open and so did everyone else. Dinner lasted into a party. Along around two a.m., with no prelude, this ecstatic black feminine voice sang out, "Oh, Johnny, Oh, Johnny, How you Can Love!" I don't remember the story Johnny had just told, not about himself, but it made this particularly funny.

Johnny was a marvelous story-teller, which is why the death reminds me of him. One night he was in particularly good style, rolling them off as fast as the rest of us stopped laughing long enough to hear another. I remember two, in part. One had to do with the embarrassment of his wife's family when he, not knowing about the difference in meaning in the second language, said something about mararolla, meaning the cheese. It seems that this, in the second language or dialect of his wife's family, is a reference to something uniquely feminine and to them very private. The second, also about himself, had to do with a putdown of some phoney intellectuals with whom he found himself. They were displaying some rather poor copies of Picasso and raving and raving, about them and all sorts of other things Johnny felt meant nothing to them. He didn't dig Picasso anyway. His painting, that is. Johnny was active for the Loyalists in the Franco revolt, so he knew who P. was. When his belly was full of the intellectual phoniness he took some of the prints, examined them contemptuously and asked, in his best exaggerated Corsican accent, "Picass? Picass? Whatsa Picass?" If you find Johnny and can get him to tell some of his stories, this will be funny and you'll understand why I remember it.

Last time we saw him was during one of the bleaker eras, probably McCarthy's. He and the late Jerry O'Connell, also a New Deal Congressman, a Catholic who was also the victim of his church because he was for popular issues and against all reaction, were both in Washington, both on their uppers. They came up to our farm and spent a wonderful weekend with us. Can you imagine what it meant to a country boy from Corsica to have all these chickens, goats and geese, probably ducks and a few cattle, too, around him? And to taste goat's milk again? Jerry was much taller than Johnny, and larger. I had good clothes for which I had no need. Some dated back to my days as a Senate investigator, before I put on a lot of weight, and some from World War II. I was able to outfit them both with suits and one with an overcoat! Johnny had to get the trousers recuffed, that is all.

And this is why I asked no story without his assent. Imagine a United States Congressman so desperately broke he can't buy even a cheap suit!

Unlike Jerry and Marcantonio, who were lawyers, Johnny had no profession on which to fall back. He couldn't even get his union organizing job back, as I recall. So, it seems probable that he has had it rough ever since. He is a wonderful human being, as human as one can be. I hope still "is".

If you locate him, please give him our best wishes and let us know how and where he is.

There was a very human thing in Jerry O'Connell's past that the unGodly used to cut his political throat. They proclaimed, probably with truth, given the era, that his wife had been a real, honest-to-goodness whore. You, fortunately, have no knowledge of The Great Depression and the simultaneous natural tragedies. This vicious propaganda broke her heart and Jerry's. She died first, both at relatively young ages. Jerry was from Montana. I think but I'm not sure that Thorkelson defeated him. If they were both in the House together, Montana came close to hitting both extremes at the same time!

Johnny and Jerry both looked like they should have from their origins. Johnny was very Latin looking, always smiling and trying to be pleasant even when unhappy. Jerry was a big Irishman, very Irish looking and thinking. Marc, however, was the superior politician. He'd make a great book. As a youngster he'd been Fiorello LaGuardia's first campaign manager. He was a superb parliamentarian, having studied it, as befit a minority of ~~an~~ one who fought hard and with purpose. Old Cannon always asked Marc to go over his revisions of his rules for the House before he had them published. What the papers and history books do not and will not record is the genuine liking among his political enemies for this popular maverick. I was often with him and them, often drinking with them, sometimes picking him up after a party with them. He lived with me for some years, all the time I freelanced, until I went into the Army. Despite his being a political outcast, considered radical (all he and the other stood and fought for are accepted today), he was remarkably successful, actually getting things for which he fought. One is the first Fair Employment federal order. He succeeded in pressuring FDR into it. I drove him to and from the meeting at which he cinched it, as I did to many others with FDR. His indifference to being on time always had me looking for a wall to climb. Even for an appointment with the President! He was never really early for one. I don't think he ever had five minutes to spare from the time I got him to the gate.

If Johnny isn't in the city directory, try the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, if they have a Chicago office, or old-time left-wingers. We would like to hear about him and would appreciate your making the effort.

Thanks,