

Conspiracies

BY ROBIN PODOLSKY

On November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. The first piece of writing that follows was developed from some musings about the movie *JFK*. The latest media-go-round on the subject has made it timely again.

On November 27, 1978, San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk, the first gay person to be elected to that position, were killed by Dan White, a former police officer turned supervisor, who was given a minimal sentence and soon released on parole. The explosive community response to the verdict was called the "White Night." An *L.A. Times* article reporting that some analysts no longer consider the assassination of Harvey Milk to have been motivated by heterosexism, but by a simple political disagreement, precipitated the second piece.

IThe president and his beautiful wife play with their children on the beach. They are everything that is young and vital and clean. The president's beautiful wife speaks French. He only has eyes for her. The president will end war and inspire the country with great aspirations.

But something threatens this great future. The old president had warned the country about the

"military-industrial complex." Some people took that to be a statement about political economy, but we know what it really means. As the old president talked, we saw a picture of two young men in uniform standing very close to each other.

Sure enough, in just a couple of years some evil homosexuals shoot the president dead. Now, where there would have been a golden age of peace and prosperity, there will be war and despair.

The district attorney, for the sake of the children he has had with his beautiful wife, is determined to bring the president's killers to justice. He does not hate them because they are homosexuals, but because they are evil. Even though they are homosexuals, he treats them with the utmost courtesy and never takes advantage of their pathetic, outdowed underground existence to make them tell him what he wants to know. The homosexuals admire the district attorney (all but the most evil one), and they want to tell him everything. One of them is attracted to the district attorney in a sexual way, and even though it will be years before anyone hears about gay liberation, the district attorney is too much of a man and a liberal to mind.

But he will expose their conspiracy. The district attorney's beautiful wife does not understand at first, and the tries to stick up for the homosexuals, but she comes to know that her husband is right.

Your bright flat faces, so large in every picture. You make all the edges. You can't see me. I am the color of the spaces between stars, and I am under all the furniture. I am gray, warm and lively, like the dancing heads that cloud your television. I am what happens after you rub your eyes in the dark. You can't see me. Your intrusions cut me up and disperse me into a million pieces. You're always in the way. I have to stretch very thin and be very quick to get around you. Sometimes I grow heavy and wet, a peaty fog. I can touch you then, and you can feel me. When that happens, one of us must choose.

Once, there was a young president, not the nicest guy in the world, a fanatic cocksman and a braggart, whose wife had to know about it, but in those days, the press was kind. The president was the nouveau-riche son of a self-made man, a man whose bootleg whiskey had made more than a few people go blind. The young president had to make it up to everyone and, also, become so powerful that his father's crimes would never be discussed in the light of day.

The young man's older brother had escaped the father and become a hero by easier means. In the middle of a war, he flew into a cloud and never came back. The young man tried hazardous duty too, but all it got him was a medal and a ruined spine.

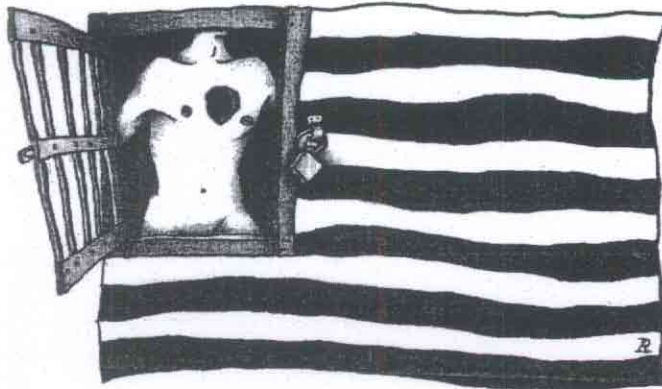
No one could save him then, not his younger brothers, not even the movie star with a heart like an open wound. He dared her to tell the world. He tried to change the system, just a little. He was a maverick with a common touch. A player's player, but

one who took steps to protect the civil-rights movement, especially after white people started getting hurt. He supported dictators and torturers all over the world. There is evidence to suggest that he might have withdrawn some troops from Vietnam.

In any case, he liked to do things his way, and somewhere along the line, he bumped into a power greater than his office — the CIA, the military, the mob, some ruling-class faction to which his parvenu upbringing could not gain him entry, no one knows.

The president's murder was never solved. A metropolitan district attorney managed, in a series of private interrogations for which I have no trouble constructing

a realistic scenario, to get a tale of conspiracy out of a bunch of closeted gay men, but nothing ever came of it. Perhaps those men were really involved in the assassination. Perhaps a government agency that continues to bar lesbians and gays from its ranks might have, 30 years ago, entrusted a top-secret mission to a bunch of unstable, self-loathing homosexuals. If anyone knows, they're not talking.



II You want to shoot a mayor and get away with it? Kill a queer political leader at the same time. So "resome to be proved right" ... again. A queer corpse has no more authority than a howling body of living queers can give it.

It's still worth remembering that Dan White was: one especially fucked-up white, working-class, straight man staring into the hole in

his life where a job used to be. Nothing he was promised coming true, not even the running start ahead of the rest of us — at least that's how it looks to him. Who was it who lied to him anyway? Whoever they are, he can't get his hands on them, but the coloreds, the queers, his chick, they're not hard to find. Especially now, the way they're always complaining and demanding things. He never thought he was in charge, he knew better than that, but he thought he had a place, a secure position in the dance of power, bedrock, and now it's gone.

I used to work with guys like him. I want to remember how to talk to him before he hurts one of us, because afterward, I don't give a damn about him at all, it's a matter for justice then. "Burn baby burn, disco inferno ... burn that mother down ..."

They say the boys never put a tighter chorus line together than on the White Night when they danced to that song as burning cop cars took the place of disco lights. On the night after that, rampaging cops, including a bunch from the bachelor party of Patty Hearst's intended (you'd think that girl would have had her fill of brutal men), tore into lesbian and gay bars. Those nights were a wake for disco, for the youth of a generation of activists.

At least nobody can say Harvey Milk died of fucking. He never saw sex fractured into categories of relative safety. He never watched the Reagan years splinter the progressive coalition that elected him, never saw how many poor neighborhoods were colonized by upper-crust gay men who broke the boycott because they needed table grapes for the Sole Veronique. He never saw his mayor and friend replaced by a consummate centrist who courted developers, disappointed trade unions and let cops beat queers with impunity, and who, now a senator, can pass for progressive in the world that Reagan built.

Now the plague and other detritus of the '80s are pulling people together again. Hardly anybody feels like a "have" anymore. The civil-rights coalition, the human-rights coalition, the rainbow, the locked-out — everybody who survived the last decade is now resigned to the torture of hope. Learning to navigate a world shorn of teleology, no longer borne on the arc of progress, the narrative of history no longer reading like a cum shot, and identity, sexual and otherwise, being something we make up as we go along, we're turning back to strategy and praxis and all that stuff anyway. To paraphrase Trinh T. Minh-ha, if we don't remember and tell our own histories, we will be told.

It would be fatal to forget the deaths of Harvey Milk and George Moscone. Dan White's kiss on the wrist, and the rage that blossomed afterward. We had always known that there were those who wished us dead and more who didn't care. In 1978, what had been unremarkable became an unacceptable provocation. Reading history backward, it's as though the future was reaching back to test us. **LA**