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Robert Stamps

It was the first hot spell of the year in Ohio, and, in Kent, a small college town at the tip of the Bible Belt, our spirits, weighted down so heavily from winter snow, were soaring. Before the day's end they would climb higher still.

We anticipated a huge, excitable crowd, what with all the threatening phone calls and hate mail we had received. The war at home had hibernated for the winter, and now it was awakening like a hungry, angry bear.

My only pair of wide bell bottom jeans stayed safely hidden in the closet of my dormitory room. In the dark ages before the capitalists discovered that a hefty return could come from the counterculture, I had strained to find a pair, coming across them of all places in the Army-Navy store six miles down the road in Ravenna, the conservative county seat.

For this special day I would dress like a gentleman, forsaking my boots for shiny dress shoes and my blue jeans jacket for a sport coat I had bought in downtown Kent at the used clothing store for three bucks. Ah, and I remembered to shave.

"There are plenty of fascists running around in blue jeans," Allie had lectured the group. "Let's not give the media the opportunity to label us as dirty hippies or revolutionaries."

The fully developed and yet hastily conceived conspiracy was born to us two weeks before, in a council, outside the dorms under the still, leafless spring trees. We sat in the darkness to conceal our identities, far from the stray microphone of a narc, the camera of a G-Man, or the notebook of a campus cop.

An odd dozen we were, black, white, girl, boy, eastern seaboard liberal and home-grown Cleveland working-class radical. We passed radical politics around like a sweet doobie, and we had comradeship to share. Still, we were a brigade of nonconformists, and no one flashed an SDS card or the Chairman's little red book. Precious little dogma, considering the tenets of the time.

To the best of my knowledge, neither was anyone the beneficiary of smuggled monies sent north by Fidel Castro to foment revolution, as was alleged in Washington. America got an A+ for scapegoating. Fidel's grant would have been consumed by record albums, assorted intoxicants, and
other staples of equal revolutionary merit anyway, not weapons or mimeograph machines. This was social change with a back beat.

But if social unrest was our avocation, it was reflected as well in our studies. There were no marketing majors in this clan. Future yuppies perhaps, but business tycoons, no.

Sarah and Sam were lovers. In their senior year, in a flower child ceremony, they would marry. Later, in the 70s, they would divorce.

And Lars Christensen, the Errol Flynn of campus agitators, rented a room like the rest of us in Tri-Towers. He was never there.

I lived in Tri-Towers as well, in a single room with a mattress on the floor and just enough space for a stereo and a refrigerator. My door, like others, stayed unlocked. *Mi casa* was *su casa.*

Built only three years before, the modern style of Tri-Towers thumbed its nose at the common dormitories and campus buildings within its view. In fine dialectical fashion, its costly rooms were hideouts for the radical elite of the University. The ground floor connected the three air-conditioned residences in a space-station like arrangement. In the center was a lounge, complete with rehearsal rooms with pianos, television rooms, study rooms, and a large, uncluttered, circular meeting room in the center, nicknamed "The Pit," with a thick, Lenin-red carpet. That spring, the Pit would become the headquarters for the Kent People's Army.

Intrigue is not best considered in the barracks, however, and so we snuck out into the spring evening to make our plans.

Lars, the future history teacher, began: "It seems to me," he said, "that we should give up on trying to organize anything this spring. It is April already, and not much is going down. Nothing exciting on this campus since the Moratorium last fall. Can we stop kidding each other that we can get this campus hopping by June? Organizing is a slow, painful process. The mood around this campus is one of apathy. I'm tired of handing out leaflets all day in front of the Student Union for rallies that no one shows up for."

The smooth young man with the red beard waited tolerantly for Lars to finish. He disagreed with Lars, but needed Lar's speech nevertheless as a preamble to his own. He spoke so quietly I labored to hear him.

"Students around this school are sheepish," he said, as if he were beginning a lecture. "Even the ones who want to get politically involved. They need direction. They need leadership. They need an event to rally around. They will come out by the thousands."

As I was about to offer an idea, he began again: "Do you all remember last year, when Rebel Davis was passing out flyers that contained the famous four letter word outside the Union?"

We remembered. The cops had arrested him on the spot and hauled him off to jail.

"When the administration refused to make his suspension hearing public, what happened? Three hundred students took over the building in
protest. Over one hundred of them were arrested.

"The next day, eight thousand students ringed the campus in support. Eight thousand. And one week before that, any one of you would have given me that apathy speech."

Lodi, an Ohio biker nicknamed for his home town, took exception.

"Well, the administration is a lot smarter now, and they aint into provokin people like they used to. You know damn well they leaned hard on those students who took over Music and Speech Building. Some of em are on probation, and some of em aint around no more to do any complainin."

He pointed his finger at the group each time he raised his voice. We felt his eloquence.

"Students are runnin scared round this campus, and most of em dont want to get thrown out on their butts over some protest that dont make a damn bit of difference. It just gives Agnew the excuse to call us bums."

"His new word is radiclibs," Lars said, and we all laughed nervously.

The woman from Toledo sat with her legs crossed. Her long brown hair was parted down the middle. She looked at no one in particular when she spoke: "Here is the plan...."

There was a professor on campus in whose class I had the good luck to enroll. In those turbulent years when QUESTION AUTHORITY became a theme song, he downplayed his Ph.D. and asked his students to call him Jonathan. His casual nature, however, did not stem from any deference to the fashion of the times or from a disbelief in the enormity of his influence over young people. He took great pride in what he did, but he felt it his task first and foremost to convey a sense of mistrust and even of scorn toward established institutions, and, if he would give anything at all to his students, it would be to present to them the edge of critical thinking. This he did with a mountain of statistics, all committed to memory, and persuasive manner of speech.

And so at eleven one morning, I left my Spanish American Literature class, which was always benign as a sheep, and crossed the street in my fringed leather jacket to Social Problems. On any given day, it could be the gospel according to C. Wright Mills or Eldridge Cleaver.

I was to be the bearer of what I considered to be a crucial message for the class, and my own experience at public speaking was limited. Standing in front of a large class in a larger auditorium, I stuck my hands in my pockets and I cut loose.

"This being a Social Problems class and all, and the fact that we've been talking a lot about the war and things, I am very pleased to announce that for your edification and amusement, next Tuesday at noon, in front of the Student Union, a group of concerned students will napalm a dog to
demonstrate scientifically the effects of this incendiary on a living organism. Everyone is invited, there is no admission charge, and we look forward to seeing all of you there."

A few rows down, in the middle, a girl moaned, “Oh God.”

A veteran in the back with a green army jacket bolted for the door and shouted, “You’re sick!” He pushed the door open and disappeared.

Later in the day my phone rang. “This is Jonathan, your Sociology prof. Is anyone else in your room right now?”

“No.”

“I’ve just gotten a phone call, a call from a man who identified himself as a police informant. He claims to be enrolled in Social Problems, but he wouldn’t give me his name or tell me for whom he works.”

“Do you believe him?”

“Perhaps not, but I wanted to tell you what he told me. He claims that possession of napalm is a federal offense, and that all of you will be arrested next Tuesday and charged with federal crimes if you go ahead with your demonstration. I have reservations about having an informant in my class, but I think you and your people need to be extremely careful.”

I thanked him.

“Where do you have the napalm?”

“Can’t tell you that Jonathan.”

“Whose dog are you going to use?”

I said nothing.

“Can you at least raise bail money so we can go down to the Ravenna jail and get you out?”

“Thank you, Jonathan. It has all been arranged.”

“I don’t know how you could say that. Bail could be set extremely high.”

“Incarceration would only increase the publicity. See you in class.”

The five iron that stuck its head through my door announced the arrival of Mickey, a member of the campus golf team and the resident mediator of the sixth floor of Leebrick Hall, the single room dorm for Tri-Towers. It was his role to intercede in the recurring hubbubs that broke out between the doves and the hawks in the sixth floor lounge. Each floor had its own den just before the elevators, and daily, after dinner, the debates began. Vietnam, marijuana, ROTC on campus. Each side considered the other ignorant, naive, and hoodwinked. When push came to shove, as it sometimes did, Mickey would be right there with his golf club diplomacy.

“All weekend long there has been talk around the dorm about this napalm thing. You a part of that?”

“Yes, yes, I am.”
"I don’t want to tell you what to do, but some of the other guys on the golf team plan on showing up, and they’re not too pleased with the whole idea, to say the least."

He tapped his club on the floor.
"You would be smart if you didn’t show up," he told me, and he left my room without fixing his gaze on mine.

Monday’s sultriness lingered into the evening. Touring the campus with Lars, we handed out the remaining leaflets amongst the other dorms, retreating before having to answer any hostile interrogations.

Lars had been elected Master of Ceremonies for Tuesday’s demonstration.
"You ready for tomorrow?" I asked him.
"If you mean have I done my homework, then the answer is yes," he said. "I know what I’m going to say. But the rumors I’ve heard about the governor’s office being there, and the police—what if they arrest us before we even have a—"
"A chance to make our statement."
"Right. What happens then?"

The Student Union was a Hyde Park of sorts. Its entrance was a stage for moralizing Christians, for Yippies, and for the brown nosers from student government. For the spectator it was always a treat.

Having much preparation in front of me, I cut Jonathan’s class Tuesday morning and stopped by the campus police station to pick up the bullhorn we had reserved. In my dorm room I finished dressing, pirating a tie from a business major down the hall. Polished and alert, we all gathered in the Pit, linked arms, and headed straight for the Union.

We talked and laughed along the way, but our hearts were in our throats and we could think of nothing else but whatever awaited us. First, I noticed the police, ringing the crowd: motionless, erect, with big sunglasses and wooden batons. They looked like movie extras from *Billy Jack*.

An old lady pushed a leaflet in my hand. Representing the ASPCA, she carried hundreds more under her arm. A stone’s throw from her stood a deputy with an empty leash in his hand.

Quickly, Lars switched on the bullhorn. It would not work. And so, raising his voice instead, which created much more drama anyway, he began: "Napalm is a greyish, tough, jelly that once ignited may reach 2,000 degrees centigrade. The flaming gel becomes sticky and adheres quite well to human or animal flesh."

The crowd was becoming angry, and people were beginning to hoot. At the back of the crowd I saw golf clubs gleaming in the sun.
“Napalm burns with an orange flame and generates a huge amount of smoke. One bomb can plaster gobs of stuff over an area the size of a football field.”

Lars’ voice was beginning to crack.

“Officials of the company that accepted the contract to manufacture napalm stated that they did so in part because they felt that ‘good, simple citizenship’ required that they supply their government and military with the goods that they need when they have the technology and have been chosen by the government as a supplier.”

(At the 1966 price of fourteen cents a pound, the company would receive over forty-two million dollars for the 300 million pounds of polystyrene converted to napalm.)

Lars had lost all traces of objectivity.

“Inhuman acts done against any civilian population constitutes a crime against humanity, according to the Nuremburg principles.”

He put his notes and his bullhorn on the ground. His white on white dress shirt was untucked and he was so disturbed it hurt to look at him.

“How many of you have come today to see a dog napalmed?”

The people booed.

“And how many of you are prepared to use physical force to stop us?”

The people cheered. Like a conductor, Lars silenced them with his waving arms, took a deep breath, and lowered his voice.

“I have some news for you. I have some real news for all of you, my friends. There is no napalm. There is no dog. There never was. The way we see it, you have all done the right thing by coming here today, and we applaud you. But we need for you to know that halfway around the world, napalm falls daily on your brothers and sisters, and we don’t seem to hear their screams. What do we all know of the anguish of yellow people in Vietnam?”


Lars had a last breath in him. “Thanks to all of you for your effort. We hope to see you at other rallies on campus.”

The silence in the air was for us golden. After a minute perhaps, someone in the heart of the crowd began the applause which spread outward like a ripple in a pond, and the clapping embarrassed us with its endlessness and its sanction.

We twelve walked slowly back to Tri-Towers, speaking very little. Before Vietnam moved from television to textbook, Lars would see the inside of a jail cell no less than twenty times. My path would take me elsewhere, but, like him, my life’s priorities had been cemented on a warm spring afternoon, by a hound who never even existed.