

Scott Tinley

In search of the last protestor, approximately



EVERYTHING IN HERE IS A STORY but the sum of its parts. Some of it even comes right up against the truth of my tongue.

I went searching for the last war protestor, the last hippy. In some desperate cling to a long patient ideal, a pale, vibrating notion sent me in search of hair. I couldn't identify it as mid-life contingent or mortal concern, but my pre-Aquarius dating was haunting me. I needed to find a flower child with some left-over anger, receive the holy sacrament of hash if not the free love copulating communion at the alter of memory. I needed to find the last protestor, approximately.

Tin Soldiers and Nixon had come and gone but they'd been replaced by the Executive Branch of United Chevron Nations. I needed that dancing fix found in the empowerment of words. Pharmaceutical agents, yoga, tofu and Taro Cards had all failed me. I had to go back to the one thing I remembered amongst the wickless, flicker of truth—May of '68, and a glue-sniffing pubescent punk with an older sister.

I traveled north to U.C. Berkley where there had been reports of sightings, Bigfoot in beads, day-glow posters on creosote poles, acoustic guitars slung low and slouching toward the Bethlehem of free speech. And that sweet smoke that snaked west to where the sun fought the horizon. At the information center, a ghost-colored student with thick-bottled lenses rose from a thicker bio-text and studied me with a nasally disdain.

“Protestors, Hippies? Try the Discovery Channel or get-a-life.com.”

There had to be one Leftist left in this former bastion of political activism; just one young American who'd stand up, sit down for their right, or at least one '63 VW Bus driving further, further into the past. All I prayed for was the simple possibility.

Wandering the vast rolling beauty of the campus in search of anyone not welded to a walkman or cellular device, the students looked so young, so studious, so... entrepreneurial. The old stone buildings had alumni donor names freshly

carved into the ancient stone façade and small, study groups of aloof Asian kids spoke quietly among themselves. It was the sing-song diction of cyber-speak, the language of six-figure starting salaries. The scattered art about the grounds I remembered as being profound now looked rusted and industrial-safe. And among the spring-green redwoods, now tired and thick, their weighted branches held aloft with guy-wires and keep-off signs, stood newer concrete structures, rebar gray and Molotov-proof. Where were the red slashes and yellow bandanas?

I followed the smell of fresh beans past the *Hearst Library* and the *Zellerbach Business School*, towards a clean, well-lighted place with the words *Free Speech Café* routed into a piece of thinly varnished plywood. The walls were papered in black and white murals of bright faces: Mario Savio with a bull horn looking angry concerned, speaking freely. Savio had died in '96 from heart fibrillations. He was 53, dead before he got old, electrically charged until his own somatic institution shut him down.

I read the caption and closed my eyes to hear the words:

There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes
so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part;
you can't even passively take part, and you've got to put your
bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers,
upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop.

The only wheels and gears I'd put my body on when Savio delivered those words in '64 were attached to the chain on my little bicycle. The machines had changed but people were still chained to them, not knowing what for.

I took my three-dollar coffee and tried to drag a patio chair into the sun but it was bolted to the concrete floor and I swore under my breath, the sound drowned by the steady din of laptops and latte-makers. What was I here for? Oh, that's right, another eulogy, another death at 53, another good heart gone bad. It was my turn to speak in front of the Berkeley Brass about an injustice, albeit a singular one. The good they die young.

But where I had expected to find inspiration in the past, all that came to me was a point of intersection where memory played leap frog between then and now and the present became its own dimension. It was the tyranny of the urgent. I felt sick. Was there no one left who would rage against the death and dying of tie-dyed ethos, if only to scream into the rich hills and depraved alleys and hear more than the echo of quaint nostalgia? Was it all a diethylamide dream woken by heroin antidote, Narcan and dwindling numbers; that eve of destruction gone quietly

into the dying light? Who killed Davey Jones and my friend, Brian Maxwell? What hammer stopped his young and wild heart?

I marched down Telegraph Ave. past *Rusputin's Records* where you could once buy rolling papers that sold for a nickel, past *Shakespeare and Co.* where you could get a copy of *On the Road* for buck, past the Nuevo-vendors hawking bangles that dangled from piercings yet to unfold. And then up to People's Park where I imagined that a crowd had taken in with me and by the time we got to the Park we were half a dozen strong. When we arrived they all lit out for the bin of free clothes and pawed through the big plywood box for anything they could take and sell.

Somehow, I sensed that I might be closer. Something in the depravity gassed my cynicism and I knew the last protesting hippy, approximately, would be here if he or she was anywhere.

I scanned the bulletin board and saw an ad to make \$15 an hour from your home, no plasma required. I watched a couple kiss and heard one of them complain about his lover's scratchy beard. I saw a basketball game of smack-talk and chain nets below the bent rim, but no ball. I saw people sleeping in red sawdust, spooning their lives in needles of pine and steel. I saw prom queens lost to hard time and soup lines and the bitterness of faded rouge. I saw shoeless, fatherless, fearless children on soundless swings, the bearings long since gone, and the polished metal bushings smooth and efficient.

I felt the future but it came up cold and hard-edged against the hope of what had passed.

But there, off in the mimsy borogoves of a few mushrooming maples stood a middle-aged man with a garden hose; real water was flowing onto a young garden. He wore the tapestry of kings, a proud bed-sheet robe. And he spoke freely, concern in his intentioned eyes, his lips offering some inane immutable truth to no one save the white rabbit in his mind.

I approached him from behind and asked if he was the last, approximately. He turned slowly, not noticing that he had watered the ground below my feet.

"Tell Jann he promised me the cover," He said, "we had a deal." And then he moved back inside his garden and his pulpit.

To think about resistance is to think about acceptance. Not for sale or for selling out but for something of substance. Everything is true and nothing is true. And quantum physics never did get you that four-bedroom, three-bath in the burbs. War is hell but heaven has left earth, left the building with Elvis. What we have now is an iPod zeitgeist, Rollerball the movie, come true. And Vacuum Ville, baby. Everything is gone but the uncertainty of some goodness.

Walking back up the avenue, I was compelled to revolt at the repulsion, disgusted that I was still unable to distinguish the peacemakers from the agitators, as if it mattered, to speak out against the slick genocide with a Jeffersonian air and plain old grace. The best I could do was to jaywalk into a Starbucks and take a piss without buying anything at all.

I miss the 'Nam.

SCOTT TINLEY is a former professional athlete and author of four books on the sport of triathlon. His work has appeared previously in **WLA**.