

Ph.D. Dissertation
Creative Writing
School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics
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Shooting the Arrow/Stroking the Arrow

Post-Sixties Maoism in the United States

Volume One: Shooting the Arrow, a novel
Volume Two: Stroking the Arrow, a critical essay

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ABSTRACT

Shooting the Arrow/Stroking the Arrow is a fictional documentary made up of two parts. The first part, *Shooting the Arrow*, is an autobiographical novel based on the author's experience as a Maoist activist in Seattle in the 1970s and early 1980s. The story begins at the end, in 1981, when Fred, who has by now dropped out of the Party to become a writer, travels down to Los Angeles to investigate the police murder of Damian Garcia, a local Maoist activist. Los Angeles is a city of danger and diversity. Twenty percent of the population is foreign born, and much of the city is broken up into barrios and ghettos, where the police presence has the flavor of an army of occupation in a country like Vietnam. The interviews that Fred conducts show the high stakes and set an international context for the rest of the novel. The narrative then returns to the beginning of the story in 1971, when Fred first joins the Party. It follows Fred's personal and family life, his life inside the Party and the Party's political work in the shipyards, factories and on the streets. The narrative is episodic, similar in form to Brecht's epic theatre, leaping to key personal and political conjunctures in Fred's life, only this being a novel rather than a play, the conjunctures are not presented as single events, but as narrative units. The novel tells the story of what happened to an influential section of the Sixties movement that has largely been written out of the historical accounts, especially in the United States. Neither flower children nor mad bombers, these were activists who became hard core revolutionaries and tried to bring their revolutionary ideas back into the working class from which many of them had come.

Stroking the Arrow is a study of the Maoist conception of dialectical materialism that forms the core philosophy of the main characters in the novel. I argue that Maoist dialectics is simply the further development of the process – begun by Marx and Engels and continued by Lenin – of stripping Hegelian dialectics of its teleological framework. The only universal law of Maoist dialectics is the unity and struggle of opposites: the contradiction in all things between the new and arising versus the old and dying away. As such, dialectics is a working tool, and its only ontological implication is that everything changes. Mao is the first in the tradition of Scientific Marxism to explicitly reject the universality of the law of negation of the negation with its teleological implications. History is a process without an *absolute* subject, but it is not a process without subjects of any kind. Rather, there is a unity of opposites between determinism and agency. Freedom does not lie in the suspension of causality, but in understanding and being able to consciously manipulate causal relations. The individual – or group – becomes a subject to the extent that it is able to consciously step outside the situation that created it. No matter how big the situation, there is always an outside. The object of Marxist political activism is to enable the working class to step outside the process that created it and become the subject of history, rather than its victim.

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Volume One
Shooting the Arrow
a novel

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1. LA

CHAPTER ONE

We pulled away from the parking space and followed Mort's car out of the housing project. When we hit the empty fields surrounding the project, three cop cars appeared behind us. The city of LA is studded with clumps of uninhabited wasteland like these fields – perfect places for an ambush. As soon as we were out of site of the project, the cop car lights started flashing and their sirens came on full blast. Judy stomped on the gas, as did Mort in the car ahead of us.

“Aren't you gonna pull over?” I said.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” yelled Barbara.

Yell isn't exactly the right word. She was loud – she had to be to get heard over the roar of the car engines and the blast of the sirens – but she didn't sound scared... excited maybe.

“Grab some leaflets,” said Judy who was riding shotgun in the front seat, “and get ready. As soon as we hit that clump of houses up ahead, we're all gonna jump out and start pounding on doors – get as many witnesses as we can.”

I couldn't believe it. We were going to try to outrun the cops? This was madness.

Bridget tugged at my arm – she was sitting in the back seat next to me.

“Don't worry, Fred, we know what we're doing... pulling over in the middle of nowhere would be suicide.”

When we hit the clump of houses, both cars slammed on the brakes, fishtailed to the side of the road and came to a full stop in perfect sync. The doors flew open, and we flew out of the cars and up the steps to the houses on either side of the road.

The house I got to was brick with a well-kept lawn and a private garden, a step up from the projects – but only a step. The TV was on full blast, and I had to ring twice and then pound on the door to get anyone to answer. Just my luck, it was a cute little five-year-old boy.

“Is your mom or dad there?”

He smiled and nodded.

“Could you get them please?”

Bigger smile, more nodding.

Meanwhile, everyone else was running from door to door.

“Come out and be a witness,” they were saying.

“They won't shoot anybody if you're watching.”

“We're from the *Revolutionary Worker* and the pigs tried to catch us in the wasteland back there with no witnesses.”

By the time the cops were out of their cars, the street was full of people. I was surprised they hadn't slammed their doors and turned their backs on the trouble, but I shouldn't have been. This wasn't the projects here, but it was still East LA.

Nobody loved the cops, and the cops *hated* the *Revolutionary Worker* – money couldn't buy that kind of advertising.

When we'd hit the project that morning to sell newspapers, the project police were waiting for us – yes, the housing projects in LA have their own special armed police. They'd followed us from door to door, sitting in their cars with the lights flashing, just about guaranteeing that, if we didn't sell a paper at every door we knocked on, at the very least people would want to talk to us and give us a good word.

The good word was usually something along the lines of, "Fuck 'em" – or if they were church going, a more respectable version of the same thing.

I remember Ricardo back in Seattle, telling me about the project police – the pigs. "You don't even make eye contact with them," he said. "Not if you're alone. Not unless there's a gang of you, and even then – they got guns and a license to kill."

Ricardo had grown up in East LA, not far from Pico Aliso, where Damian Garcia had been murdered. When I had decided to write a play about Damian, Party people in Seattle put me in touch with Ricardo so I could get some background before I went down to investigate. Ricardo had told me plenty, but nothing he said could have prepared me for what it was really like. It was a different country from Seattle, maybe a different planet.

Barbara was facing down the cops now, with Judy and Bridget flanking her. I was still on the porch with the cute little kid who had progressed from smiling to giggling to a big happy laugh. I figured I'd better get back into the action, so I waved goodbye to the kid and joined Mort and the rest of his crew, who by now

were fanning out through the crowd selling newspapers and talking about revolution.

“The pigs are like cockroaches,” was their favorite mixed metaphor. “They’re afraid of the light.”

Barbara was demanding an explanation for why she’d been pulled over. Her face was a couple inches from the lead cop, but she spoke loud enough for the crowd to hear. It may have looked like she was showboating, but it was all cold calculation – get the crowd on your side, make it them and us.

“Why did you stop us?” said Barbara.

“You were speeding...” said one at the same time as another said, “Your brake lights don’t work...”

“The lights work fine,” said Barbara.

Judy opened the car door and stepped on the brakes. Bridget stood behind the car. “Yup, they’re working fine. What’s your problem?”

There was a big crowd surrounding and pressing in close to the cops, who were all out of their cars by now. It was an almost carnival atmosphere. The cops looked angry and a little bit nervous – I noticed a few hands resting lightly on holstered guns.

Then the cop who seemed to be in charge said, “We’ll let you off with a warning this time. But you’d better get that light checked – there must be a short in the wiring.”

In a minute, the cops were back in their cars and driving off. The crowd was jazzed – you don’t see LA cops back down very often. We stayed in the street for a while, selling newspapers and talking revolution, then went back to the cars.

Judy, Barbara and Bridget high-fived each other. “The girls are back in town!”

CHAPTER TWO

I'd flown into LA from Seattle two days earlier. Bridget was there to pick me up. She had black hair and freckles and was dressed kind of stylish – not a typical look for Party members in Seattle, but in LA, I was told, they had more of a division of labor. Bridget was assigned to work in the cultural arena, so she dressed the part.

She hustled me out to the car park with the usual chitchat about flight schedules and weather. As soon as we were in the car and underway, she turned to me and said, "So tell me, what's this all about?"

"I thought you guys knew. People in Seattle said you'd agreed I could come down here and do some interviews."

"They said you wanted to write about Damian."

"That's right – a play."

"So you're a playwright?"

"Sort of."

"Have you been produced?"

"Not anything big time. I've had one production at a small theatre in Seattle – a musical."

"You're going to write a fucking musical about Damian's murder?"

“Not a musical comedy. Think of it as a play with music. Brecht used music with his plays.”

“You’re a composer too?”

“Not a composer. I write songs. That’s the kind of musical I’m talking about – a play with songs.”

“Did you study music?”

“I’m self taught. So was Irving Berlin. He wrote all his songs on the black keys of the piano. He had a special piano made so he could change keys with a foot pedal.”

“You play piano?”

“Guitar.”

We drove on in silence for a couple minutes.

“Listen, Fred. I’m not trying to give you a hard time here. We just don’t know that much about you. We know you’ve worked with the Party up in Seattle and they say we can trust you. But that’s about it. That’s all we know. And things are heavy down here. Well, you know that, I guess – they murdered Damian – that’s why you’re down here. We just have to be careful.”

“I understand.”

“How long have you worked with the Party?”

“Years. I used to be really close... “

She understood what I was saying here. It was kind of a code. Most of the Party membership was secret, even to other Party members. I was telling her – without telling her – that I used to be in the Party.

“I dropped out a few years ago. No big political disagreements, I just got discouraged – and selfish. I wanted to be a writer, so that’s what I started doing. Then I got sucked back in again...”

“Sucked back in...”

“Well, I was working at Todd Shipyards when all the fighting broke out there. I had to take sides...”

“Gee, tough luck for you...”

I didn’t like the sarcasm I could hear – or maybe I just felt guilty... “Look. I’m not a Party member. I haven’t dedicated my life to the revolution – or rather I did, then I took it back. I’m an apostate...”

“It’s not a religion, Fred.”

“So don’t talk to me like I’m a sinner.”

By now we were at her apartment. It was on the second floor of a two story building. Didn’t seem to be many of those in LA. Other than that it was sort of a generic LA apartment building – flat roof, white stucco walls, a parking lot in front, of course, and big windows that could be opened to catch the wind – if it ever came.

“Want something to eat?”

“Thanks, I ate on the plane.”

“Well, I’ve been assigned to pick you up and give you a place to stay. I’m not going to chaperone you – I’ve got other things to do – but I’ll hook you up with people. I’ve got it set up for you to go around to Pico Aliso tomorrow, show you the spot where it happened.”

“Great.”

She broke out some cold drinks and we talked about art and politics for a couple hours. She was sharp, not just about politics – I was used to that –but she also had a strong background in the arts, much more so than me. I’d been getting irritated lately at people in Seattle spouting the Party line on art, when they’d never given it much of a thought beyond reading an article or two in the *Revolutionary Worker*. Bridget had thought about it plenty. I was willing to bet she’d done a degree or two in art school. But that didn’t dampen her appreciation of the “classics”.

“So,” she said, “have you read Mao’s *Talks at the Yen’an Forum on Literature and Art*?”

“Sure.”

“Recently?”

“Pretty recently.”

“How many times?”

“Just the once.”

“It’s worth re-reading.”

“Yeah, it’s good.”

“It’s worth re-reading a lot.”

“Say, is there a store in walking distance from here?”

“Nothing in this city is in walking distance. What do you need?”

“Well, it’s hot here. Just thought I might get some ice cream.”

“Tell you what, I’ll pick up the ice cream. You can read Mao’s *Talks at the Yen’an Forum* while I’m gone. Then we can sit on the balcony steps where it’s cooler and talk about it. Then we can watch David Letterman.”

“Who’s that?”

“A local talk show host.”

“Like Johnny Carson?”

“Well, the same kind of format, but he’s a lot more... well, he’s got a different take on things. It’s hard to describe, but easy to see if you watch him. I think you’ll like it.”

So I sat on the balcony steps reading Mao’s *Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art*, while Bridget went for the ice cream. Then we watched David Letterman. He was okay, but I liked Johnny Carson better.

CHAPTER THREE

I woke up the next morning about 6 a.m. I'm pretty much of an early bird – at least I used to be back then. The morning was almost cool, but it wouldn't stay that way. It was early March but it felt like the summer had already started in LA.

Bridget had a lot of books, but they were in her bedroom, so I sat on the balcony re-reading Mao's *Talks at the Yenan Forum* – what the hell.

The alarm went off at 7 a.m. and Bridget came out of the bedroom a few minutes later.

“Did you have breakfast yet?”

“No, just re-reading Mao.”

She gave me a look that I couldn't quite interpret. “There's cereal in the cupboard. That's what I'm having. You can cook some eggs if you want. You might have time before Judy gets here. I've gotta dash for work.”

“Cereal is fine.”

I had the table set and the cereal out by the time she was finished in the bathroom. Judy arrived in the middle of our cornflakes. They greeted each other like long lost pals.

“Hey, sister.”

“Hey, sister.”

“So you're the mysterious writer guy.”

“Not very mysterious,” I said.

“You’re gonna write about Damian – you think you can do him justice?”

“I’ll try.”

“He’s going to write a musical.”

“What?”

“Not a musical comedy,” I said. “A play with music. Like Brecht.”

“You write music too?”

“I write songs.”

“Cool. Maybe you can sing some before you go.”

“If there’s a guitar...”

“I have to go to work,” said Bridget. “Judy’s gonna show you Pico Aliso.

She’s on a workteam selling papers there. You don’t mind selling the *Revolutionary Worker* door to door with them?”

“No, I’m okay with that.”

“If you wanna get a feel for what it’s like in the projects, there’s no better way.”

I hated selling newspapers. I always had. It reminded me too much of Catholic school and being forced to sell chocolate bars from door to door. When I left the Party, I felt depressed as hell, but at least, I told myself, I’d never have to sell another fucking newspaper.

Ha.

Bridget split for work, while Judy and I cleaned up.

“So, a musical, huh?”

“A play with music. Like Brecht.”

“Well, too bad I can’t sing. I think it would be fun to be in a play.”

Judy had short blonde hair, a pretty face and curves like a 1950s movie star. She had a big hearty laugh and a presence that filled the room. I could imagine her on stage – or as a tractor driver in the Soviet Union.

She led me down to the parking lot. I was half expecting a tractor, but it was a zippy little sports car, far from new, but still red and shiny. She squealed the tires on the way out of the lot.

Pico Aliso was in Boyle Heights, about a fifteen minute drive from Bridget's, practically next door by LA standards. To be honest, I don't remember much about how the neighborhood looked. It's become blurred in my mind with the slums and run-down neighborhoods of a hundred other cities. I remember that a lot of the walls were tagged with gang insignia. The housing project itself had the standard army barracks feel – it reminded me of the projects we'd lived in when my dad first got out of the army.

We pulled into the parking lot next to another old car. This one was anything but red and shiny. It was a Dodge Dart, dirty blue, with a few dents, but nothing memorable. Beside it was a serious looking woman, dirty blonde hair, no dents, nothing memorable – until she spoke and you got the full blast of her intensity.

“Fred, this is Barbara.”

“So you're the one's going to write about Damian.”

“He's gonna write a musical.”

“A play with music,” I said. “Like Brecht.”

“You're a composer too?”

“No, just a song writer.”

“Have you ever had any of your plays produced.”

“One. Nothing big time.”

“What makes you think you can do a good job with Damian?”

“Come on, Barbara, give him a break. I’m sure he’s gonna do his best.”

Barbara was clearly a leader of some sort. She had that kind of no nonsense air that I recognized so well from Seattle.

“Anyway, we’d better get started,” said Barbara.

“What happened to Mort and the rest of the crew?” said Judy.

“Something came up. I’m filling in. It’ll just be us three. Fred, don’t go wandering off. This is East LA. As long as you’re selling the *Revolutionary Worker* with us, you’ll be okay, but you don’t belong here on your own.”

“Got it.”

So off we went. It was mostly mothers who answered the door – and older sisters. The men – and often the women – were off working at this time of the day.

“Usually we try to sell on the weekend, so we can hit everyone,” said Judy.

“But sometimes it’s better with just us girls.”

“I won’t exactly fit in.”

“You’ll fit in just fine, once we tell them you’re writing about Damian. He was well known around here.”

And it was true. Just about every other door we knocked on had a story to tell about Damian.

“Yes, he was my boyfriend,” said one old lady, laughing. “He talked to my grandson Ricky, when he was going off the rails. Ricky respected Damian.

Everyone did. Those people who killed him weren’t from around here. I don’t even think they were cholos.”

“That’s where they killed him,” said an older girl with a room full of noisy brothers and sisters behind her. “Nobody will walk over that spot now – not because he was a saint or anything, but he was a good man. He talked to me with respect. He didn’t look at me like I was a piece of meat, the way most of these cholos do.”

We walked down to the spot where he was killed. There were two cop cars in the parking lot that overlooked the block we were in. I pointed them out to Barbara and Judy.

“They’ve been following us all day,” said Judy. “Haven’t you noticed?”

“They always follow us when we come to the projects,” said Barbara. “That’s how we know Damian’s murder was a police hit. They’d been following the Brigade all day – then they vanished and this gang of strange cholos showed up, attacked the Brigade, and then disappeared. Then as soon as the cholos were gone, the cops came back and arrested the survivors.”

“The only two people that were stabbed,” said Judy, “were the two people who had been up on top of the Alamo, Damian and Denny.”

“I thought there were three who climbed up on the Alamo.”

“There were,” said Barbara. “Gail Buyers was the third, but she stayed down in El Paso where she was from.”

“I’d like to talk to some people who were here at the time of the attack.”

“We’re trying to set up an interview for you with some of them now,” said Barbara.

“I’d like to talk to Denny too, if he’s still in LA.”

“We’ll see,” said Barbara.

CHAPTER FOUR

But the next day I was taken to another project to sell papers and get more of a “feel” for the place. And did I ever. This was the project visit I’ve already described that ended with a cop car chase and a near riot as we pounded on doors to get people to come out and be witnesses so we wouldn’t get shot.

That whole incident had been like a modern day version of the Wild West. I was amazed at the way they’d pulled the crowd out of their houses and used them as protection from the armed police.

“Karate of the mouth,” said Judy once it was all over. Then she clapped me on the back and said, “Good going.” It felt like I’d really accomplished something, but I knew I hadn’t. I was just a tourist. They were the real thing.

“I didn’t get anyone to come out,” I said, “just a five-year-old kid, standing in the door and giggling.”

“Yeah, but you jumped in and tried to do something,” said Judy. “That’s what counts.”

There were still a few people on the streets by then, but the crowd had thinned out considerably from the angry mob that had surrounded the cops and forced them to back down. The excitement was over now. Mort and his crew loaded into the lead car. He stuck his head out the driver’s window and yelled, “Hey, let’s get out of here.”

“He’s right,” said Barbara. “No point in waiting for the pigs to come back.”

We climbed back in the car and followed Mort onto the freeway. We twisted through a maze of on and off ramps and fifteen minutes later, we were parked side by side at a McDonald’s – a favorite meeting place for conspirators all over the world, I think.

But this time there was no meeting. Both car trunks were opened and stacks of papers were transferred from Barbara’s car to Mort’s. We’d only spent a couple hours in the projects and it was still early in the day. Mort and his crew were going to sell newspapers at a jazz festival in Watts. Barbara, Judy and Bridget had something else going, but they didn’t say what.

I was dropped off at Bridget’s and left to watch TV – or read Chairman Mao – for the rest of the day. Bridget was still out when I hit the sack after the David Letterman show. I liked him better tonight.

The next morning Bridget was up before me and just about ready to go out the door when I got up.

“You can’t be going to work this early,” I said.

“I’ve got something to do. Judy’s going to come by and pick you up in about an hour. We’ve lined up an interview for you.”

“Terrific. With Denny?”

“No, but someone who was there.”

She was out the door and gone before I could ask anything more. Two hours later, Judy knocked on the door. When I opened it, she gave me a big hug and said, “Good morning, comrade.”

She squealed the tires on the way out of the parking lot again. This time, the two wheels on my side came up off the ground as we hit the corner.

“That was good yesterday, huh?” she shouted over the engine noise.

“You enjoyed that?”

“Sure, I love to sell the paper, get out and meet people, find out the news on the street – and it was good to get back with the girls.”

“I wouldn’t dare call you girls.”

“You better not. That’s what we call ourselves. We used to be sort of a girl gang selling papers, me, Barbara, Bridget and Carol – that’s Damian’s wife.”

“What’s Carol like.”

“She’s a sweet kid. Kind. A really good mother to little Damian. Don’t get me wrong – she’s got steel in her.”

“Little Damian... two years old, is that right?”

“He’s an angel. We all love him.” She rubbed one of her eyes. “We had some great times, the four of us. We didn’t take shit from anyone – especially cops. We used to play Thin Lizzy’s ‘The Boys are Back in Town’ as our theme song. It drove the pigs crazy that we were women and wouldn’t take any shit from them. They didn’t know what to make of us.”

“I can imagine.”

We screeched to a halt in front of a small bungalow with brown grass in the front yard and a flower box full of brightly colored flowers in the window. We walked up the sidewalk and Judy knocked on the door. We could hear the faint sound of children yelling. Then the door opened and Judy was introducing me to Luisa.

She was a short, sturdy Mexicana in her late twenties, wearing a light colored blouse and blue jeans. She led us into the living room and a little brown streak flashed out of the kitchen and leapt into Judy’s arms.

“*Buenos Dias*, comrade Judy,” the little girl said.

Judy swung her around and then deposited her back down on the brightly colored living room rug. “*Buenos Dias*, comrade Carmella,” she said solemnly.

Luisa had two children, Carmella, the little brown streak, age five, whom we had just met, and Raymond, a few years older, standing in the doorway of the kitchen and examining me carefully.

Luisa introduced me to both her children. “He’s going to write about Damian,” she told them.

“He’s writing a musical,” said Judy.

“A play with music,” I said.

Luisa gave me a big, heartwarming smile. “Damian would like that. He loved music.”

Her son, Raymond, looked at me very seriously. “Are you going to write a good story?”

“I’ll try,” I said.

“Good.”

Carmella had gone all shy now and was peeping out from behind her mother. “I liked Damian,” she said.

Judy stayed with the children while Luisa and I drove off to a nearby MacDonald’s for a long interview. I was amazed that Judy trusted me with her shiny red sports car, but she handed me the keys nonchalantly. “You’ve got a license, don’t you?”

“Of course,” I said.

“No worries, then.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“It’s just around the corner and two blocks down,” said Luisa as we climbed into the car.

“Are you from LA,” I asked over the engine roar.

“No, I came up from Mexico a couple years ago.”

“Your English is perfect.”

“Thank you. I studied it in school. And then, I’ve had a lot of practice.”

She told me what city in Mexico she came from, but I wasn’t taking notes yet and I don’t remember. When we got to McDonald’s, we ordered hamburgers and coffee and sat at a table by the window.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been interviewed before,” said Luisa.

“That’s okay, I’ve never done an interview before... You were there when Damian was killed?”

“I’ll never forget that day,” she said.

“Maybe you could just tell me about it then... and also, maybe you could tell me a bit about yourself too – whatever you want to tell me... your family, how you came up here, how you got involved with the Party...”

“Okay,” she said. She thought for a minute. “I think I’ll start in Mexico.”

Luisa’s story:

My father split when I was twelve. It was a typical Mexican family – husband drinks, hits wife, goes out with other women, has other kids. We'd raise pigs and butcher and sell them. We never paid taxes. We lived in a house made out of scrap wood, with a tin roof and a dirt floor.

My mother had been a maid in my father's family. They never married. When father would split for a while, my mother carried on butchering and selling. Of course she did all the washing, cooking, cleaning, sewing, all of that kind of stuff.

Us kids, we didn't have to help much. We were supposed to study and make something of ourselves. You know, we had a little money – our family, because of the butchering – more than most people in our neighborhood anyway.

My ex-husband and I were both students at a junior college – you know, a technical college. The students were always fighting with the cops. Big meetings and marches. The cops weren't supposed to come into campus, but they would throw in tear gas.

The junior college was part of a Mexico-wide complex. A lot of the new teachers would come in with no teaching materials, so they made up their own materials on whatever kind of stuff they wanted to teach. They'd do stuff like... like the Russian revolution, dialectical materialism.

I thought the Left would unite – that there was only one line and all the people would get together. But when teachers had a strike to form an independent union I saw some were for Russia, some were Trotskyites, some from other parties, some with no parties. I didn't know what to believe. I thought, "Who the hell is talking the truth?"

The teachers said, “You’ll learn more in the strike than you’ll learn in school.” But because the teachers were disunited, they lost. A lot of the students left school, fed up, but looking for something else

My boyfriend and I got married during all this, but he started drinking and I could see it all turning out the way it did for my mother. The second time he started hitting on me, I left him – two months before my littlest one, Camilla, was born. So there I was – married, divorced, two kids... I decided to come to the US to stay with my sister to make some money. Then I planned to go back to Mexico with the money I’d saved, go back to the university and get some kind of career. I wanted to be able help people back home. I didn’t know how, but I wanted to do something.

First thing though, I needed money. I got me a job at a bar. That’s why my English is good – they were mostly Anglos, the customers. The tips were good, and things were looking okay for a while.

Then it all changed. I started fighting with my sister and eventually I was run out of the house. It began when a friend came up with her boyfriend for an abortion. I helped her to find a job as a waitress at a bar. My sister said, “You got a job for your friend – to feed her. You care more about her than me.”

Things just went bad after that. I got in a broom fight with my sister’s boyfriend. We fought out in the yard. The neighbors came and watched. My friend and her boyfriend had decided to split, but my sister wouldn’t let them have their clothes. They were locked in my sister’s boyfriend’s car – a brand new car – the biggest thing in his life. I started beating on it with the broom handle. He tried to get it away from me, but I was too strong. Finally he unlocked the trunk where my friend’s clothes were. The cops had arrived by then, but we told the cops *de*

nada. Then my sister hit me, and we all started fighting again. The cops said, “Don’t fight in the street,” and left.

I took my children and we all moved in with my friend and her boyfriend – well, we moved into his car. All five of us were living in that car for about three months. That’s when I came across the Party. I saw a poster in Spanish about a memorial to Mao... Mao-Tse-tung? In the U.S.? I was thinking “It’s probably some people from South America,” but that it was U.S. revolutionaries – it never crossed my mind.

So I decided to check it out. I went to the park where it was supposed to happen, and the Party was there with red flags. They sang the International in three languages: Spanish, English and Chinese. I bought their newspaper, the *Revolutionary Worker*. I thought, this is incredible. Then they gave me a phone number. I called them. And after talking to them, I started going to stuff.

When they said, “Hey, do you want to help us sell the paper?” I thought they would never ask.

One night, Judy came by with Damian. They told me the Party was going to build a May Day demonstration that would be the biggest thing in... well, in a long time, that it would put the red flag out there in front of everyone, make it the main topic of conversation in the country.

Well, I wasn’t so sure how that could happen. I said, “This is 1980, not the Sixties.” But when they explained the idea of forming up into May Day Brigades, sort of like shock troops that would go from city to city, stay for a week or so, join up with local struggles, make a big deal out of May Day and generally raise hell, I jumped at the chance.

By then I had made up with my sister, and she agreed to take care of Raymond and Camilla for the time I would be away.

There were twenty of us on the West Coast Brigade, mostly from LA and the Bay Area, but there was Denny from Portland, and one guy from Seattle, Charity. Yeah... I thought you would know him. He was taking time off from Bethlehem Steel.

Seattle was the first city we hit. Bethlehem Steel – I'd never been in anything like that before. Hundreds of workers streaming out on the change of shift – one guy came out with May Day stickers all over his lunch pail. He took a red flag from us and held it up in the air. Another guy wouldn't pick up a flag but said, "I'm with him." We threw the chain barricade away and marched in formation down the road to the plant. There were about a dozen guys from the plant who joined us, and quite a few more who seemed to be digging it. Charity was all over the place rapping.

Sometimes in LA I run into Blacks and Latinos who say, "Why don't you go among the whites and organize them?" So I would tell them about Bethlehem Steel.

Todd Shipyards was real different. You worked there? You gotta tell me about that... okay, when I finish. I can't believe you worked there. I've never been in an attack like that before. When they came out from work, a group of fascists attacked us. They looked like they were organized. They began to tear up the flags and mess with our security. They started beating on us and we started beating on them. It was just like one big ball of fists.

The fascists tried to mobilize other workers to attack us but didn't get any help. I heard them say to one guy, "I thought you enlisted, man. What do you think about these commies?"

"I'm going into the army, but they got a right to speak."

We marched out from Todds in formation. Some of our flags were torn up. Some of us were beaten. More of them were.

I wasn't there for the Alamo. My sister was freaking out with the extra childcare. My little ones can be a handful when I'm not around. So I had to stay in LA when the Brigade went down to Texas. I would have given anything to be there when they climbed up on the Alamo.

But I still wasn't working, was still free in the days, so when the Brigade came back to LA, I joined up again. I was there when Damian was murdered.

The first time I went out with the Brigade in the projects was about a week and a half before the murder. We went there from 4 to 7 p.m. on a weekday. We came in with red flags, chants, marching in formation, then we fanned out and went door to door. A lot of kids took red flags and ran around with them. We became known as the "red flag people".

There's criminals in the projects – there is everywhere. A lot of drugs, especially among the youth, but it's mostly working class. There's hardly anyone there on the weekdays during the day. They're out working. Even the gangs divide. Some really dig us, some don't – more into drugs and crime.

The week before the murder, we were out spray-painting in Pico Aliso, just the two of us, me and Charity. It was night, we shouldn't have been out by ourselves, but we were too enthusiastic. Some gang members came by, "What the fuck you doing to our walls?"

When I told them what it was about, they decided to do security for us. They set up a perimeter to warn us if the cops were coming. This old Black guy came by and started giving us a hard time. He'd been drinking quite a bit and I think he was just kinda talking shit, but the gang didn't like it. One of them said, "These people are going up against the system. You can't talk to them like that."

But this old guy kept talking shit, and the gang was getting more and more pissed off. A couple of them pulled out guns and were getting ready to off him. We had to stop spray-painting and talk them down.

The day Damian was killed, we had just been to the court house – the police commission was meeting to decide whether they were going to give us a permit for the May Day demonstration. There were all kinds of delays and bullshit, so we got started late. It was just ten of us, one team from the Brigade, mostly East LA people except for Denny.

We started in Pico at Block A. We were marching in formation with banners, two agitators, one Anglo and one Spanish speaking. Right away the pigs started following us. It was both the HAPD and the LAPD (the housing pigs and the city pigs). Already that was kind of strange because usually it was just the housing pigs. People came out of their houses; the kids took flags and would ride around on their bikes and scout for us. They'd report back, "Two pig cars ahead..." stuff like that.

Then suddenly all the cops disappeared. They'd never done that before. Then these cholos came up out of nowhere. They looked like gang members but they weren't any of the gang members we'd seen before. There were just two of them at first. They were drinking from pint flasks. One of them started yelling shit at us.

"Get the red flag outa' here. Get the fuck outa my territory."

Our tactical leader went up to him. She said, “This ain’t your territory. The pigs run it. The working class has no borderline.”

Then he said, “You guys are against the government, well, I am the government. You guys are the fucking red flag. Mine is the red, white and blue.”

I was thinking, “She’s talking to a Marine.” But he didn’t have a Marine haircut.

We formed up and moved on to the next courtyard. By that time there were three cholos. They emptied their pint flasks and threw them at us. They tried to grab our banners. Then they grabbed the garden hose from a woman who was watering her lawn and tried to hose us down.

The brigade fanned out. We went behind the guy with the hose. He dropped the hose – or some people grabbed it from him. One of his friends picked it up and tried to hose us again.

Another guy showed up, who seemed to take on a role of orchestrating things. Damian moved in on them with a newspaper, saying “Hey, check this out...”

The first guy tried to knock the papers out of Damian’s hand. The guy that seemed to be in charge held onto the guy with the hose until six to eight more guys came around the corner to make a total of twelve to fifteen. Then he said, “Okay, fuck ’em up.”

Then they charged us and a fight began. The leader type was still coordinating things. He said, “You don’t need to get the women.”

Suddenly, they all disengaged and split in one direction.

“Let’s get out.”

“No hurry...”

The Brigaders were left standing, wondering what had just happened. Then they saw Damian on the ground. Someone was trying to get Damian to get up. Another guy had gotten a bottle smashed over his head – there was blood dripping down.

Denny was trying to help Damian. He didn't know he had been stabbed yet. It was only a few minutes before the cops reappeared. Damian was moving, breathing, he had a pulse, his leg was shaking.

Someone lifted up his shirt and we saw his guts hanging out. She screamed, "God damn. What the fuck." She looked up at us, "Call an ambulance."

We told her that we already had.

We tried to give him first aid. Some of the neighbors tried to help too. We could see he was dying. Someone started to sing the International. We all joined in.

The first batch of cops just stayed in their cars until a large force was there. Then they all marched in with clubs. They marched right past Damian and pushed into the crowd to get them to disperse.

We were back on the bullhorn saying, "These pigs aren't here to save anything. They're here to stop what Damian stood for."

One young Black guy – about 17 – said to me, "I knew that's what it had to be."

We were doing broad agitation, calling on people to take this red flag up, talking about police murder to stop May 1st.

Some people were saying, "It was cholos did this." Others were saying, "It was police hitmen – look at how the pigs vanished just before." Others thought it was reactionaries that were put up to it.

The police were ordering the crowd to disperse, pushing people around, but no one was leaving. The crowd just got bigger. They started arresting Brigaders one at a time. The pigs started cleaning things up. They didn't treat it as a crime scene, they tried to clean it all up, but somebody got Damian's flag before they could get to it. It was covered in blood.

The ambulance showed up five minutes after the pigs got there. They came in with med kits, but ignored Damian and just looked around. Finally they took his pulse, opened his eyes, then threw a sheet over him.

Denny was standing by Damian. He had tried to give him first aid. Nobody – including Denny – realized he had been stabbed too, until they went to handcuff him.

A young woman from the projects was getting the names of everyone in the brigade as they were arrested. She would shout out their names so everyone could hear and remember.

“What's your name? Denny? What's your whole name? Denny Haydn Fisher?” Then she would shout out, “DENNY HAYDN FISHER IS A HERO OF THE PEOPLE.”

“What's your name? Louisa what? Louisa Gonzales? LOUISA GONZALES IS A HERO OF THE PEOPLE.”

She already knew Damian's name.

CHAPTER SIX

That's the end of my notes from Luisa. I'm a crap interviewer. I never have gotten the hang of it. Sooner or later I lose focus and just start chatting. I don't have anything written down about what it was like for Luisa in the police station after the arrests. But I did learn one thing more that day: Barbara had been there in Pico Aliso when Damian was killed.

"Barbara was there? I didn't know that."

"Oh yeah," said Luisa. "She was tactical leadership. She's got a cool head on her shoulders"

Yeah, cool as a cucumber. She hadn't given me a clue that she had been there.

"You never asked me," said Barbara when I taxed her with it the next day.

"But you knew I wanted to talk to people who had been there."

"And we set you up with an interview. We thought it would be more useful to you – talking to someone like Luisa, rather than a long-time Party member like me... give you more of a feel for how people here in East LA related to the Party and the May Day Brigade."

"That's true – but I want to talk to everybody," I said.

"And what are you going to do with it?"

"I told you – you knew before I even got here. I'm going to write a play about Damian."

“But what are you going to say about him? Why do you want to get all this personal information? Are you going to do some kind of psychological study... “

“No...”

“...make up a bunch of personal conflicts...”

“No...”

“Isn’t that how you make it dramatic? Isn’t that what they do on TV?”

“It isn’t the only way to make it dramatic. I don’t think so anyway. It’s about exposing contradictions, but that’s not just about psychological conflicts. Look at Brecht’s plays. He found a way to show the conflict of ideas...”

Of course there was a real psychological conflict going on back then, but it was all inside my head. The thing is, I believed everything they did – I just wasn’t living it. I had dropped out and I was determined to stay dropped out, not because I thought they were wrong or deluded, but because I wanted to smoke dope and write songs and tell stories. But I still believed in everything, so how could I write from the heart and not write about them?

It felt like Barbara was giving me a hard time, but she wasn’t really. She just couldn’t understand how I could not be in the Party if I still believed in revolution. But I had a lifetime of experience in living a lie. I had been raised a Catholic and didn’t get rid of that bullshit until I was twenty-one, even though I had given up any hope of practicing it from the age of about fourteen.

I hated going to Sunday Mass – it was boring and my knees hurt and the incense made me sneeze. So I quit going. I would sleep in on Sundays and pretend to go to a later Mass than the rest of the family – a mortal sin. Not the only one.

I was a terrific thief – I could clean out a store right under the nose of the most suspicious clerk. It was easy for me to go over the \$50 limit that made

stealing a mortal sin. Every day and twice on Sundays. Then puberty came along. Just about everything connected with puberty was considered a mortal sin back then.

All that time I walked around knowing that if I got run over by a truck I would spend eternity in the infinite pain and loneliness of hell. It had taken me seven long years to get free. But I had a strong suspicion that it would take more than seven years to get free of Communism, because while religion was a lie that was laid on me when I was young and defenseless, Communism was an understanding of the world that I had fought through a mountain of lies and bullshit to get to. I knew that Damian Garcia would never get up and walk again, that I would never wake up to find the napalmed children of Vietnam had just gone off to a picnic and were really alive and having a good time.

Okay, it wasn't all true. Nothing is all true. The surest sign of a systematic lie is that it's all true. I'm still trying to figure it out now – how much of it was group dynamics, wishful thinking, or not thinking at all. But whatever the mistakes were, the basics haven't changed. The dog is in the street, as Gil Scott-Heron said; the dog is still in the street.

That's why I decided to start this book at the end of the story – in LA where all the contradictions of capitalism came up and smacked me in the face harder than I'd ever been hit before. Of course it was still a kind of a second-hand smack – I was just talking to people who had seen and been done to, rather than being done to myself. But then maybe that's why I'm still here to tell the story.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Once I found out Barbara had been there when Damian was murdered, I got her to agree to an interview for the next day.. I didn't find out anything about her personal life – she wasn't interested in talking about that. Clearly she had been in the Party for a long time, maybe since it started. Clearly she was in some kind of leadership position in the Party. A lot of what she said was on a different level of abstraction than Luisa's, but I think it came just as much from the heart.

You be the judge.

Barbara's story:

After the murder, I remember the pigs on the way to the station laughing at us. They were saying things like, "I guess you won't be coming back here anymore."

But in the station, they switched to diplomacy...

"Handcuffs too tight?"

"Not in that cell – he's too drunk."

When one of the cops started jeering, "Hey, you guys the commie pinkos?" they elbowed him to keep quiet.

One of them said, "Internal Affairs'll be called in – don't wanna give them anything to play with."

Then we were taken into the briefing room and quizzed by these Joe College type pigs.

When we were left alone in the room, we whispered to each other:

“They created a mortal enemy by killing Damian.”

“The red flag has the blood of many martyrs.”

“We’re gonna make these pigs pay.”

“They think they’re gonna stop us on May Day, but they’ll see.”

“Death is sorrowful, but it is also honorable.”

Events like that make people for years and years. Things of that intensity are decisive. At that time, not many people were around us, but what was significant was that we were standing by the international proletariat.

At first there was a tendency to look down at the table. Not be defiant. All these uncontrolled thoughts hit you. He couldn’t be dead. Great fear that it had happened. We spread a *Revolutionary Worker* newspaper among us and used it as a thing to gain our bearings. The world is bigger than these projects. The hatred of the masses is being fused with the understanding of the Party.

It was on us now. The flag had been passed to us and we had to carry it. Singing the International while Damian was dying was like a pledge.

When we got out of jail, we went back to Pico Aliso. People said, “Hey, they’re back.” They flooded around us. Kids on bicycles set up patrols to watch out for the pigs. The masses of people were our arms, our legs, our eyes, our heart.

About Damian. I remember how excited he was at the start of the Brigade. He wanted to come so bad, but we didn't know at first if we would be able to sort out childcare and finance for him.

He was always chewing his fingernails.

The pigs arrested him and another comrade the week before the murders. They took them to Hollenbeck Station. They had a picture on the wall of Damian getting busted at the Alamo. They had a target drawn around his head.

“How did you get out of there alive?”

“We'll finish off what they didn't.”

“We'll take care of you.”

Damian was always “nagging”, “heating up a situation”, saying, “What do you guys think of this?”

I remember the last thing I heard him say that day – to the bastards that killed him.

“You believe in the system, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“A lot of people believed in the Titanic.”

He was the only one on our workteam who spoke fluent Spanish. Sometimes he would refuse to translate or tell me to translate so he could see how much I understood.

Going door to door, right after Damian was killed, a woman came out, yelling, “Goddamn Communists. The same thing is gonna happen to you 'cause you're all liars.”

I got mad at her. I yelled back and left her house. Her teenage son came out and said, “Why did you talk to my mother like that?”

We went to the next house. A teenage girl opened the door and said, “Come in. They’re gonna start a fight.”

Her mother came out and ushered us into her house. She said, “We all knew Damian. He came to the projects a lot. I still can’t believe it happened. We talked a lot about politics, but we were just friends too.”

Old ladies with no teeth and varicose veins would hug him and pretend they were his girlfriends. They would ask him to talk to their sons. He was deeply interested in what they said. They would say to him, “Oh this kid, I don’t know how to deal with him...”

There was some struggle with him about this. We would say, “Is it political or are you just making friends.”

He loved to wander off to play pool. He had his own cue. We’d struggle about politics and gambling too. He’d say, “Some people, you can only talk to them about politics over a pool table.”

After he was killed, I called all his contacts to tell them what had happened. I started at six in the morning and kept going until midnight and still wasn’t done. People couldn’t believe it. Many cried. Many got on the phone to tell their friends. People who had been backing off said, “Hey, count me in.”

After the murder, the Brigade went back to Texas, to the Alamo. In San Antonio the pigs would say to us, “Alright, who’s your leader here?”

We would answer, “Damian Garcia.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

I'd interviewed Barbara at another McDonald's, our floating office franchise. We paid the rent in coffee and Big Macs. Afterwards, she dropped me off a couple blocks from Bridget's – no reason to make it easy for the pigs to figure out who was consorting with whom. For the same reason I wasn't surprised to find Mort inside talking to Bridget, even though his car wasn't parked outside. Mort was short and wiry, with short, wiry black hair. He was wired now, almost jumping up and down with excitement

“Mort was just telling me what happened at the jazz festival in Watts last weekend,” said Bridget.

“You know,” said Mort, “the one we were headed to when we split up at McDonald's last Saturday.”

“Jazz in the park?” I said.

“That's right,” said Mort. “It was jammed full of people. As soon as we got to the edge of the park, the pigs appeared out of nowhere and surrounded us. Must have been about twenty of them.

“‘Where do you think you're going,’ they said.

“‘What business is it of yours?’ we said. We were already starting to get an audience. People were wondering why the pigs had all converged on one point.

“‘You can't go in there,’ said the pigs. ‘It's not safe.’

“The only thing not safe around here is you,’ we said.

“You can’t sell papers in the park – it’s illegal.’

“The hell it is. What are you afraid of?’

“But they were blocking our way into the park and it looked like they were getting ready to make some arrests. So we got on the bullhorn and started rapping to the crowd.

““Why don’t they want us to sell the *Revolutionary Worker* here in the park? What are they afraid of?’

“We started talking about revolution and May Day, and the crowd started getting bigger, surrounding the pigs, giving them shit about coming into the park and messing with their festival. So in the end, the pigs just backed off and we went into the park and sold papers and passed out leaflets all day. We sold tons of newspapers and made a lot of contacts – a lot of people were interested, wanted to know more.

“The next day we came back with two more carloads of people and there were no pigs anywhere in sight, but as soon as we got to the edge of the park, we were surrounded by young clean-cut Black guys in civvies but wearing the kind of plain black shoes that you see cops in most of the time.

“And they were taking a page out of our book, they were rapping at the crowd and trying to turn them against us, talking about these outsiders, these white people – even though only about half of us were white – coming into “our” community and trying to lay their trip on “us”.

“And it was working a bit, some of the crowd were getting kind of hostile, so I got on the megaphone and pointed at the guy who was doing most of the talking, pointed at his shoes and said, ‘Are you a cop?’

“Wham! He punched me in the face. Fighting broke out and things got really confused. Some of the comrades got separated and wandered into the park and sold papers and talked revolution and had a great day. But the rest of us got chased out of the park and had to run for the cars and drive outa’ there.

“As soon as we took off, the street filled up with cop cars, their lights flashing and their sirens blaring, and we floorboarded it and kept going. Once you get away from that side of the park, it gets kind of isolated, so we kept going until we hit this big shantytown – we’d never seen it before, never gone that way, but there must have been a couple hundred dirt floor shacks. We slammed on the brakes and started knocking on doors, but people were already running out before we hit the first door.

“They were recent immigrants, mostly Mexicans, and they saw the red flags and they thought – what the fuck, what are you guys doing with red flags?

“They couldn’t believe we were waving red flags. ‘Do you know what that red flag means in Mexico?’ they said.

“And we said, ‘The same thing it means here. Revolution.’

“They couldn’t believe it. We said, ‘We’re not pretending it’s gonna happen here overnight. It’s gonna be a long hard struggle, but the US can’t go on invading countries and sucking out blood forever.’

“And by then, the pigs were trying to get in and pull us away, back to the police cars, but the whole barrio just flooded out and surrounded them, and everybody was taking red flags from us and waving them in the pigs’ faces, it was like a fucking carnival, I’ve never... you know, I’ve read where Lenin talked about revolution being a festival of the oppressed, but I’ve never seen anything

like this, like I could imagine in all the fighting and terrible bloodshed that there could be this kind of joy too.

“People were hugging us and saying, ‘You send guns down to Mexico – your country does – and the army uses them on us... We never imagined there could be people on our side... not here.’

“By now the pigs were back at their cars, but while they were hassling us, the kids had taken all our May Day stickers and plastered them all over the pig cars. The pigs were trying to pull them off but there were too many, and if there’s one thing we know how to do, it’s make glue. So they had to drive back to headquarters, their cars one big advertisement for revolution.”

Mort paused for a moment to catch his breath... I was trying to imagine this scene happening in Seattle. I couldn’t. I knew what he meant about revolution being a festival of the oppressed, though. I’d felt it – the power that comes from standing up after a lifetime of being pushed around. But lately I’d been thinking more about other quotes from Lenin and Mao that talked about revolution being a civil war, not a dinner party, not painting a picture or writing an essay – lately the scary side had seemed a lot more real to me.

“So what d’ya think?” said Mort.

“What?” I’d zoned out – had no idea what he was asking.

“Do you wanna come with us?”

“They’re going back this Friday with more newspapers and leaflets,” said Bridget. “They ran out last weekend, and a lot of people want to know more.”

“Sure,” I said.

CHAPTER NINE

The next day I interviewed two people. Neither one of them had been there when Damian was killed, but they lived in East LA and worked closely with the Party. This time I set up office in a near-by McDonald's and waited for them to come to me. I think Judy had gotten in trouble for taking me to Luisa's house. Not that they didn't trust me, she said, but if I had no particular reason to know where they lived, there was no point in showing me.

Stephen was big and blond and looked to be about twenty years old. I wasn't surprised to find out he lived near Pico Aliso. Back in Seattle, my friend Ricardo had told me more than once that there were a lot of blond-haired, blue-eyed Poles living in East LA. Charles Bronson of *Death Wish* fame was his favorite example – although obviously Bronson had missed out on the blond hair.

"I got a lotta respect for him," Ricardo would say. "Okay, *Death Wish* is a reactionary piece of shit, but Bronson had a tough life, he had to fight his way up, he had to be tough... You know they were so poor when he was a kid, he had to go to school in his big sister's hand me downs..."

Yes, I knew. Ricardo had told me about the dress so many times that I thought I could just about sew it myself.

"Imagine going to school in your big sister's dresses."

"Hard to imagine," I said.

“That’s the kind of thing makes you tough,” said Ricardo.

“A real life boy-named-Sue,” I said.

Stephen didn’t look much like Charles Bronson but maybe a bit like Stanley Kowalski. He was wearing trousers and a clean white T-shirt. He had a firm handshake, looked me in the eye and said, “Yes, sir” and “No, sir.”

He was on an hour lunch break from work, he said, so we would have to make the time count. I asked him to tell me how he first got involved with the Party.

Stephen’s story:

I always hated the system. My dad was in the Marine Corps for 20 years. The land of opportunity – and I wasn’t going anywhere. There was nothing for me to do. This system isn’t designed to use people’s potential. It chews ’em up and spits ’em out. But I wasn’t really political, just getting by. Studying off and on, whatever interested me. I went in for anthropology, big-time. Back then I was working in a movie theater at nights to pay for classes in the day.

Some people came out to my school for a forum on Iran. I went to check it out. As soon as class got out I ran down and listened to them. Everybody was throwing questions at them, and they were answering them. They said, “Revolution is a long process.”

I ran back to class and said, you guys gotta check this out. When they announced the Iran demo at Berkley for the next week, I decided I would go. They kept holding out this paper – the *Revolutionary Worker* – and saying, you gotta check this out.

So I did. I read it on the bus home. I took it out when nobody was looking and folded it up. Someone tapped me on the shoulder and said, “What’s that you’re reading? It’s not a KKK paper, is it?”

I said, “What? No, what you talking about?”

So I gave him a paper and he started to read it. He was working at the same school I was going to, so I started getting it to him regularly.

A few weeks later, we went up to the march in Berkeley. It had this big reputation from the Sixties, but it didn’t seem so radical to me. I saw these students walking with books, heads down, not taking leaflets. “I gotta get to class.”

I really got into the march. 1500 people were in the march. I got back to LA and there wasn’t a thing about it in the *LA Times*. That got me thinking.

I was reading Mao’s *Red Book* in the living room. My mother said, “I don’t want you reading that in here. Put it away so my friends don’t see it.”

Of course, that just got me more interested.

I was working with the RCP’s Youth Brigade by then. I thought May Day was Russian Tank parade day. But I learned about the history of the day, how it started with the fight for the eight-hour day, how it had always been a day of struggle. Getting out the paper had become the whole center of my life. When I heard about a chance to do nothing but get the paper out, I jumped at it. I quit school, quit my job, left home, told my folks I was gonna hit the road for a few weeks, and joined the May Day Brigade.

CHAPTER TEN

Stephen's story had sounded fairly familiar to me. It was typical of the second generation of people who had joined the Party – working class, but with some college, curious and excited about all kinds of things, too young to have been in the thick of the Sixties, but with a big interest in the ideas it had popularized.

Hervé was different. He was from Guatemala. He had short black hair, dark skin and a stocky build. I guessed he was about the same age as Stephen, but he had three children already – the oldest was five years. He came in after work on his way home. He had a job as a construction laborer, but he'd taken the time to wash up and put on a clean white shirt and freshly washed blue jeans before he left the site. Only his shoes gave away the work he'd been doing.

I was reading Mao when he came in, the same book as before, *Talks at the Yen-an Forum...* It was a short book, more like a pamphlet, and I was on my third or fourth reading...

"Is that a good book?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

"I've read some things by Mao," he said. "He's hard to read... well, that's not exactly what I mean. He's easy to read, he has this clear and simple style – but it's so clear and simple that it's easy to miss things. I find I have to go back and read and reread his stuff, kind of meditate on it to get everything out of it."

That pretty much summed up my experience too.

Like Stephen, Hervé couldn't give me as much time as he would have liked. He was working long hours in construction, and it was already late by the time we got started. He was clearly exhausted from the day's work, but he seemed eager to talk to me, eager to communicate his outlook on the world.

Hervé's story:

We came from Guatemala. I didn't see any future for me. No family, I knew I couldn't make it, so I came here. I worked here for three years. I met some revolutionaries – some other group, not the Party. Then I started realizing that the ideas I had about people in this country wasn't reality. I didn't think anybody here was into revolution – just parties and recreation.

There were some Party members working at the plant where I work. I started going to meetings. I do not belong to the Party 'cause I got doubts in my mind. If I'm going to do something, I got to believe in it.

Doubts. I don't believe the whole world will be communist. I can see trying, but it's gonna take a lot of time, because people are so backward. They think things are fucked up because the people running the system are fucked up, but they think the system is okay.

I just don't understand why so many of us can't get together and overthrow the motherfuckers who are fucking us. Why is it just up to the people who are willing to make the change and everybody else will sit back?

Damian would say to me, "You have to keep struggling with people to change their minds. We have to have confidence in them."

Well, I can struggle, but it's up to people to change their minds.

Damian lived in the barrio. He said he was gonna work just with his people, but he started to see that as divisive. He decided he should work not just for our people but for everybody.

Damian was happy whenever he gave the system trouble. He never felt nothing like that until he became a revolutionary.

I know it needs a lot of courage and I don't know if I have it, but if I'm going to do that, I have to understand it. The people who are joining the Party are working like leaders, because they have to be. And I don't want to feel like that. I don't like to go to Party meetings because I can do a better job without mentioning the Party.

If there were a real communist place and somebody gave me a choice to live there or here, I would go to live there, because that's the way I've wanted to live all my life.

But I know there isn't, because there are people who want to take advantage. I know how my people is. I know most of them don't give a shit about what's going on. If I work with people with religious beliefs, I'm gonna do my best to try to wake them up. I don't believe in God, because God is nothing solid. I believe in you and I believe in me.

In Guatemala, you don't have the chance to read any anti-government books. My wife hardly can read. She had to work from second grade. Her mother died when the children were still young, and she was the oldest. I try to help her to learn to read and write. The most help I can give her is to help her realize that she isn't living in the world she thought she was.

One of my biggest interests is to make my kids grow up understanding that we don't have to live in a superficial way. The only way to live enjoying life is to live in a constant learning of why the system does what it does against the people.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When Judy picked me up the next morning, she had a big smile on her face.

“Guess who you’re gonna interview today.”

“I give up – who?”

“Denny.”

“Really? He’s here in LA?”

She nodded, still smiling.

“I thought he was somewhere else – or else just that you didn’t trust me.

Every time I mentioned him to Barbara, she would just nod and say, ‘We’ll see.’”

“Yeah, well Barbara’s a careful person. She has to be. But we trust you, Fred.

You’re a comrade.”

“I’m not. I dropped out. I’m never coming back in.”

“People have all different kinds of ways to contribute. You wanna be a writer.

I respect that. Maybe you got something special to give.”

“Maybe I’m just a no talent wannabe. What gives me the right to sit in a room typing while other people are out on the street fighting.”

“It’s what you wanna do. You gotta do what’s in your heart. If you don’t do that, whatever else you do is gonna be crap anyway.”

“You don’t talk much like Barbara.”

“I love Barbara. She’s a really good person – and she knows how to navigate... you know what I mean?”

“I think so...”

“You know, what Lenin says, how to pick out the key link in a complicated situation...”

“The one thing that’ll move everything else forward...”

“That’s right,” said Judy. She kind of lit up. “That’s right. She’s got the gift. And I love her, and we’ve had some grand adventures... but she can be too heavy sometimes. You’ve gotta do what’s in your heart.”

I wanted to believe her.

Denny was staying in the same house as Damian’s wife, Carol, and their child, little Damian. Judy lived there too – and Mort and I’m not sure who else. I guess something had changed because Judy took me right there to the house. We screeched to a halt in a cloud of dust just outside the front door – not much point in parking two blocks away when you actually live there.

The house was empty except for Carol and little Damian. She was in the kitchen typing something at the kitchen table. Damian was busy building some kind of a fort out of pots and pans.

Carol was blond, slim, and seemed kind of quiet and self contained. Well, anyone would have seemed quiet compared to Judy – when Judy laughed, the house rocked. Little Damian was two years old, I think, maybe a little older – I’m not good at guessing kids’ ages. He seemed happy, but kind of quiet too – maybe that was just my imagination, because I knew what had happened to his father.

Little Damian glanced at me briefly, then went back to building the fortress.

Carol finished the dishes and left them to dry on the rack.

“So you’re the one writing the play,” said Carol.

“I’m going to try.”

“And you’re here to interview Denny.”

“I’m just trying to learn everything I can about Damian, his friends, East LA...”

“Fred’s been helping us sell newspapers too,” said Judy, “getting a taste of East LA law enforcement.” She lifted up the coffee pot and felt the side. “Coffee’s still warm. Want some?”

We both nodded. She poured out three cups.

“Denny’ll be back in a few minutes,” said Carol. “Then I have to leave with little Damian. We’re going to the doctor’s.”

“I hope nothing’s wrong...”

“No, it’s just a checkup.”

Of course I wanted to interview Carol too, but I didn’t know how to ask, how to do it without sounding like an invader. Judy helped by going over to play with little Damian. I sat down at the kitchen table with Carol.

“I don’t want to intrude, but... could you tell me a bit about Damian... I mean anything that would give me a feeling for the kind of person he was...”

“I don’t mind talking about him,” said Carol. “I want little Damian to remember his father, and the more we all talk about him... well, I guess that will sort of help.”

She stopped for a minute and stared over at little Damian. He and Judy were putting finishing touches on a pots and pans version of the tower of Babel. “Judy, that’s about to tip over.”

“No, it’s fine,” said Judy.

Seconds later the tower collapsed. Judy deftly caught the ones that were falling in little Damian’s direction. Carol shook her head and turned back to me.

“Damian was a good man,” she said. “He was a wonderful father. He doted on little Damian. He was very protective of us both – sometimes too much.” She looked over at Judy. They smiled, as if sharing a secret joke. “He took his responsibilities seriously – us... his people... the world... He hated any kind of bullying, and he wasn’t afraid to stand up to anyone.

“He wasn’t a saint. We had arguments. He could be kind of traditional sometimes – but not male chauvinist, not a-woman’s-place-is-in-the-home type of thing. He was really supportive of me being an active revolutionary like him. That was part of the attraction.”

“Where did you meet?” I asked.

“Santa Barbara. We were both students there at Isla Vista.”

“Where the Bank of America was burned down three times?”

“There was a lot happening there,” said Judy from the corner.

“But it was kind of isolated from the working class,” said Carol. “That’s why we moved down here. Of course, Damian was from LA anyway.”

“I was in Isla Vista back in 1971,” I said. “Just for a few days. I was with this kind of weird guy. I don’t remember his name... red hair, red beard, always talking about the horrible things he’d done in Vietnam, how fucked up he’d been...”

“Clive,” said Carol and Judy both at the same time.

“That might have been it,” I said. “We were coming back from the People’s Peace treaty convention in Michigan. We rode in the same car.”

“He was a pig,” said Judy.

“Yeah,” I said. “I sort of thought so.”

“No, I mean literally,” said Judy. “He was an informer for the FBI.”

“That’s why I brought him up,” I said. “I saw an article in the local rag back in Seattle. It was about the psychological troubles that informers had, how hard it was for them...”

“Stop, you’re breaking my heart,” said Judy.

“And there were pictures of ten men – they were all men...”

“Of course,” said Carol.

“Who had been FBI informers, and I thought I recognized Clive.”

“He did a lot of damage,” said Carol. “A lot of damage to a lot of good people.”

We were all quiet for a minute. I remember thinking to myself – that was stupid to bring that up. Are they starting to wonder about me now? Then the front door opened and Denny came in. There were hugs all around. Everybody hugged everybody in that house, but it seemed Denny and Carol had a special bond – after all, Denny had been with Damian when he died, and he had almost died with him. Then again, maybe that was just my imagination. I was there such a short time – everything seemed portentous

After the introductions, Carol was up and gathering the day’s supplies.

“Did you finish the leaflet?” said Denny. “Oh, yeah,” said Carol. “I almost forgot.” She pulled the page she’d been working on out of the typewriter, put it in

a folder and packed it up with the baby gear. Then she grabbed little Damian and was out the front door.

A second later, she popped her head back in, “Hey, Fred, sorry I can’t talk longer. Good luck with the play.” Then she was gone.

Seconds later, Judy disappeared upstairs, so I could interview Denny without interruption.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Denny was a little taller than average, kind of lanky, and seemed slightly more hippie-looking than the average Party member – I don't remember why – maybe he had a goatee or longer than usual hair. He seemed kind of tired. I know he was still recovering – he'd been in critical condition for a long time, and he'd only been released from the hospital a few months ago.

I knew Denny was a Vietnam vet, that when he got back from Vietnam, he had been court-martialed and put in the stockade for passing out the Declaration of Independence on the Army base.

“The Declaration of Independence,” said Denny, “says people have the right to make revolution against a government that has gotten out of control. The Base Commander felt that was a little too subversive for soldiers no matter who wrote it.”

That was about all I knew of Denny's personal life, and I didn't learn much more in the interview. He wanted to talk about May Day and revolution, what had happened on the May Day Brigade, and what it all meant. He was kind of slow and relaxed as he talked at first, but once he got going he became more passionate – it was like he was on a street corner and I was standing there in a crowd. I just let him run with it.

Denny's story:

The thing I remember most about Damian was his willingness to struggle with people. He would not give up on people, he kept trying to win them over. He was not liberal – he would not cover over differences.

But he had this deep love, warmth, affection for people. Combined with a real hatred of oppression. He was quiet, but he kept pushing things, bringing out contradictions, and he would listen. He listened a lot.

He was an internationalist. He'd come to that through a lot of struggle, wondering whether he should just work with his own people, with Latinos, but once he made up his mind, he never went back.

What I've learned from all this – hating oppression isn't enough. You can't operate just on revenge. You have to understand the system and how to get rid of it. What's key to this whole thing is understanding.

What's inspired me – seeing what people are capable of, what they can understand. Damian died in my arms. Seeing how people reacted, they didn't run away. They joined us and fought back.

How much people are pushed into motion – how hungry people are for knowledge, including Marxism. How an advanced section can move people, act as a beacon, bring people forward.

Damian – there had been a lot of struggle about work in LA. Damian wasn't somebody who would always come up with the correct line, always have the right idea about what should be done. But he would keep struggling until he was won over – or until he changed your mind.

When he got accepted into the Party, he was ecstatic. Very proud, honored. The night before he split to go off with the Brigade, he had a bald tire, we was trying to get it fixed before he left.

The things I remember most about that day – the kids first of all. When we hit the project, kids marched with us, really dug it, marched and joined in with bicycles. Their favorite chants – “Red, white and blue. We spit on you”, and “*Nuestra bandera es roja – no raja, blanca y azul*”.

When the fight started... Well, it didn't seem like anything at first. They jumped on some of us that were isolated... I went up to the group that had someone down and started to pull them off. I got knocked down – probably stabbed then. I got up, heard a scream, saw Damian on the ground bleeding. Saw his stomach was ripped open. I tried to make a bandage. A woman opened her house for phone calls. Another brought towels down, came back later with hot towels.

The crowd started to build – 150 by then. They were angry.

“We didn't know this was happening.”

“Is he gonna die?”

“How can we help?”

Damian was dying. I tried to give him mouth to mouth. It did no good. No pulse. He was dying. Members of the Brigade gathered around. We sang the International, first verse in English and Spanish. Some of us stayed trying to give first aid. It was hopeless. The rest of the Brigade fanned out to agitate. A pig chopper hovered overhead. Pigs on foot came in. They immediately went after the Brigaders. They told us to shut up. Handcuffed us. Gagged us.

People from the project were yelling, “You’re arresting the wrong people. These aren’t the murderers.” People were still coming up, saying, “What can we do. There must be something we can do to save him.”

When cops went to handcuff me, they could see my shirt was soaked with blood. They were trying to drag me back to the squad car but the crowd surrounded them and demanded they call the medics back. The cops were really nervous by now. One of them said to the medics, “They’re really hostile, they’re mad. Be cool, man, there’s a lot more of them than us.”

When the medics went to give me a shot, one of the cops stopped them. “Don’t do that. Not with this crowd. They’ll think you’re trying to hurt him.”

This really pissed off the crowd. One of them yelled out, “What d’ya think you’re in a fucking Tarzan movie?”

After that, they gave me the shot, then took me to the ambulance. All the way back in the ambulance, the pigs were asking me questions. They followed me into the emergency room. When the medical team took off my clothes, the cops wanted to take them, but the head nurse said no.

The cops said, “It’s a homicide.”

The nurse said, “Only if you’re holding it for evidence.” Then she looked at me... “And even then, he’d have to sign them over to you.”

The Alamo – we went there from Houston, where people are still living in slave cabins from before the Civil War.

San Antonio is supposed to be this picture postcard city, but it’s a military town, everyone has a job with the military. There’s Fort Sam Houston, Lackland AFB and a bunch of others. There’s a large concentration of Chicanos and

Mexicanos. Their babies are born on the bus on the way to the maternity ward, which is 19 miles away.

The Alamo is downtown. It was rebuilt during the '30s. There were twenty to thirty tourists around the outside when we got there. Gail loosened the flag ropes on the ground before we started climbing. I carried two boxes with banners and leaflets. Damian climbed up first. My foot got stuck on the way up and Damian had to pull me clear.

An old Texas Ranger saw us climbing and yelled, "Hey, what are you guys doing up there?" But he didn't move any closer.

A Chicano family saw us climbing, they pointed at us and smiled – very big smiles.

Once on top, we ran for the front of the Alamo. We threw over the May Day banner while Gail lowered the Texas state flag and the American flag.

Damian started the agitation. "We're here to set the record straight. The Alamo is the symbol of exploitation of Mexicans, a memorial to gunslingers, thugs and Indian killers fighting for slavery."

Then I did some agitation about being a Vietnam Vet. "I thought Davey Crocket and Jim Bowie were real heroes. But I found out what they were all about in Vietnam. The Alamo was the beginning of America's first war of conquest. Viet Nam was the same thing."

We threw leaflets from the wall. People down below were racing to grab them. One older white guy read it, was disgusted, crumpled it up and threw it on the ground. An older Chicano woman picked it up, read it, folded it up and put it in her pocket.

Meanwhile, there were Brigaders down below passing out leaflets and talking to people.

One kid said to his mother, “What’s going on?”

She said, “Don’t pay any attention to them, they’re just Iranian students trying to get attention.”

There was a group of high school cheerleaders there. One of the Brigaders asked them, “What do you think?”

“Oh, we think it’s cool.”

An older Chicano guy asks what’s going on. The Brigaders told him. He says, “Oh yeah? Thanks. Yeah, thanks.”

A white guy in his 30s says, “I haven’t seen shit like this since I was in college.”

Meanwhile, up on top of the Alamo, Gail had run the red flag up to the top of the flagpole. When that red flag got to the top of the pole, the breeze caught it and spread it out. And we all stopped for a minute and looked at it and looked at each other. I don’t know what else is coming down the road, but so far, that’s been the high point of my life.

We took turns agitating over the bullhorn:

“They list the nationalities of those who died inside the Alamo – German, French, Irish, Russian, etc., even some Mexicans. But they were fighting for slavery. That’s their idea of multi-national unity. But during the Mexican-American War, there were 9,000 deserters. Over 250 Americans joined the San Patricio Brigade to fight against the American invasion. The United States military hanged 50 of them after the Battle of Churubusco. They waited until the

American flag was raised to hang them. These are the people we stand with. We say it's a crime that even one stone of the Alamo is left standing today.

“The murder of the Mexican people, the theft of their land, the destruction of their culture and language goes against everything we stand for.

“Here they have a monument. They expect people to kneel down and whisper in their shrine. They have pictures of Davy Crocket and John Wayne. Right in this city where they said in the news today that the city couldn't afford to put all the Chicano kids in school, where you can still get fired from your job for speaking in Spanish and know you'll be the first to get sent off to war.

“We say no, we ain't gonna bow down to this. And much as they try to tell us it's a monument to their victory, it's a monument to their defeat.

“The red flag – it's not just a matter of Chicano and Mexican people fighting against their oppression, but of all people fighting against all oppression, exploitation and the liberation of all humanity.”

We sang the International.

We were up there for about an hour. After the first ten minutes, the cops came and ordered us to get down.

Damian got on the bullhorn and said, “One thing that's different about this day is that you're gonna find a few less pigs in the barrio, guns in hand. What is it that's so important about this red flag?”

Cops hid out of sight for a while because they didn't know what to do with the crowd. Finally they told the crowd to get away from the building. They tried to push them away, but no one would move.

The helicopter couldn't land, so it hovered overhead and tried to drown out the agitation. Rifles were aimed at us from the helicopter.

Damian took the bullhorn and said, “We don’t have any weapons but this bullhorn, leaflets and the red flag. That’s what they’re afraid of.”

Finally a fire truck came and the pigs used the ladder to climb up on the roof. The first one up stood there with his hands on his hips and said, “What do you think you’re doing up here?”

Then more pigs got up and handcuffed us. The head pig said, “Okay, get them to the back.”

They were dragging us to the part of the roof where we’d be out of sight from the crowd that had gathered, but people ran around to the back of the Alamo so they could still see us. The pigs were cursing and making threats.

“Damn, we should have shot them.”

“Why don’t we just throw ’em off the wall like Joe Torres.”

“Yeah, but this time there won’t be any water.”

[Joe Torres was a Houston civil rights activist, murdered by the police in 1977 – handcuffed, beaten up and thrown in the bayou to drown.]

Damian kept on agitating, shouting to the crowd from the roof. The firemen brought up a rope. They tied up Gail so they could lower her down from the roof, but the police took the rope from the firemen and dangled her over the edge as if they were going to drop her. The firemen freaked out.

The pigs were expecting cheers. Instead, there was dead silence, except for a woman who yelled out from below, “You’re not gonna throw anyone off that roof. I know what that flag represents. My brother came home wrapped in it.”

The pigs said, “Okay, we’re gonna show you just what people think of this.” They lowered the red flag, but the crowd was still mostly quiet – a tiny handful

clapped. "Okay we're really gonna show you." They ran up the Texas flag. Same reaction.

One at a time, we were lowered down from the roof.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Denny didn't have to tell me what the reaction was after they got down. We had all heard the stories over and over. It wasn't until then that I ever really got what a symbol of Yankee Imperialism the Alamo was – and of slavery – that's what they were fighting for at the Alamo, the right to own slaves. They never mentioned that in any of the Davey Crockett movies I saw as a kid.

The next day, photos of the red flag flying over the Alamo were in newspapers all over South America. It filled the front pages in Nicaragua. In Houston and El Paso, people would recognize the May Day Brigade from the local newspaper coverage. They would come up to Damian, Denny and Gail with tears in their eyes and hug each of them. "It should have been done a long time ago." A lot of people said that.

It made a big impression on the pigs too. The threats against the three of them began after that. Damian was singled out for special attention. A Mexican up there on the Alamo with a red flag seemed to be even more of an insult – or a Chicano, same difference to them.

Of course, the Alamo action was only a gesture. Friends of mine who had no use for the Party would point out that nothing had changed – it was just a bit of grandstanding, the sort of thing the Party was always doing. But some gestures can mean a lot.

I liked Denny. He impressed me as sincere and dedicated – and he had certainly put his life on the line – but I had heard the rhetoric before... Meeting Carol and little Damian had kind of shook me up. Carol and little Damian, just by being there, alone... the missing father... It reminded me that there was another reason I had dropped out. May Day 1980 was the first time as a revolutionary that I had ever felt my life was in serious danger. I had reacted to that by ducking my head down and doing what had to be done – but I knew in my heart that once the crisis was over and the spotlight was off me, sooner or later, I would get the fuck out.

When we got back to Bridget's flat, Judy parked the car about two blocks away and hopped out.

"You coming in too?" I said.

"I am." She tossed me the keys. "You're not."

"You got another interview set up for me?"

"That's right. The two Johns. Well, John and Juan, but everybody calls them the two Johns. They could almost be brothers, except John is Black and Juan is Chicano." She handed me a piece of paper. "This is John's number. He'll give you directions."

I took the paper and climbed into the driver's seat. "Am I going to see you before I leave tomorrow?"

"Hey, Fred, you got my car – I better see you."

"Oh, yeah."

"You're gonna see plenty of me – I'm driving you to the airport. And don't forget, we're doing that shantytown tomorrow before you leave."

"Good – you're coming to that?"

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world. Now get out of here. There’s a payphone eight blocks down the road in the Safeway parking lot.”

“Thanks, Judy.”

“Hey, Fred. Be careful, you’re going to Compton.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

John and Juan both lived in Compton, a couple blocks from each other. Juan had gone over to John's house, and they were both waiting for me there. John gave me very detailed directions and told me to hurry up, so I could get there before dark. But I made a few wrong turns, got lost for a while, and by the time I found his house, it had long since gone dark.

He had told me he would leave a space in the driveway so I could park there. He did leave a space, but there was another car further up the drive, so I decided to park on the street and leave the driveway clear in case the other car wanted to get out. Fortunately, there was a parking space in front of the house next door.

I was in the middle of a letter-perfect parallel parking maneuver when John came running out the front door in a panic. "Jesus fucking Christ, what in the goddamn hell are you doing! I told you to park in the driveway. This is Compton, don't you get it? This is Compton!"

The truth was, of course, I didn't get it. Almost every time I'd heard Compton mentioned, it was in the phrase, "Compton and Lynwood". Well, Washington state has a Lynnwood too. It's a middle-class suburb just north of Seattle. And so – quite irrationally – I figured if Compton and Lynwood were sister neighborhoods, then they both must be safe.

Ha.

As John and Juan both told me, once I was parked and settled in the kitchen with them, you don't fuck around in Compton.

John and Juan were both big burly guys, with strapping muscles and broad smiling faces – except when they were giving me a tongue lashing about the dangers of Compton. And they both talked fast – real fast – too fast for me to keep track of who was saying what in my notes. I just wrote down their comments as they shot them off, rapid-fire, on everything from religion, to their own lives, to their experiences on the May Day Brigade with Damian.

The two Johns' story:

I didn't understand things, didn't understand the world. Thought an economic depression was just a force of nature. Didn't know what imperialism was. Heard the word, didn't care.

Could see things getting worse and worse...

Got fired, couldn't get unemployment comp... kicked out of the union, couldn't make some dues. Ran into the Party, at the unemployment office. Signed their petition.

The next time I ran into them, things were even worse. I liked them because they were talking about revolution, not just new blood in the White House. I couldn't see how just changing things in the White House would make a difference.

My next door neighbor's an old man. At 62 his factory closed down. He'd worked for the minimum wage all his life. He was forced to retire because he couldn't find a new job. When they upgraded his social security by \$20, they sent him a letter telling him he was supposed to report in. But he couldn't read or

write, so he didn't know. They cut him off. They said he was cheating. He worked 50 years, raised 9 kids. They all went in the military.

You go through life being scared... Lose your job and you can't make payments. I used to say, "Here's all these people getting killed and here's all those people stabbing us in the back. Why don't we shoot 'em?"

Sometimes I find it hard talking to Chicanos... my own people. How do you look at the whole thing? Is it just, we gotta get rid of the white people? I believe Black and white can unite and make revolution. You can't blame a whole people. Look at Mexico. The people are oppressed, but the government is all Mexican.

People would ask me, "What you guys gonna do for the Blacks and the Mexicans?"

But I say, "What if the majority in government were Black? What good would that do, if it was the same system? Nothing. That's right."

La Raza Unida is really spreading. A lot of poverty pimps are starting to see they can get their own thing.

Mexicans, they understand. They see things that Chicanos don't see. Because in Mexico, it's about class. Mexicans buy the paper – the *Revolutionary Worker* – but it's harder to get them involved. They've got too much to lose. They got to worry about *La Migra*. The old ones say, "I'm too old to be on the streets."

Downtown, some guy came up to me and said, "You guys are Communists, atheists."

"Listen," I said. "I don't believe in God since I was twelve years old."

"You guys are Commies."

"We know that," I said. "What do you know about Communism?"

“I can’t read that paper,” he said. “I’ll get brainwashed.”

“Listen,” I said. “You already brainwashed. You watch TV, you read papers. They already got you brainwashed. I see a lot of people read the Bible, they don’t got halos, they don’t got wings. You read the paper, it don’t make you Communist.”

I tell you, religion is killing us, a plague on the community. I said to my cousin, “Your whole family is religious. Your father, your mother, your sisters, brother, aunts, uncles, cousins... Here, your father is telling your brother to go in the Air Force and kill people. You go in the church and the preacher is talking ’bout God bless America, go out and kill for America...”

So we talking like that and my cousin says, “You’re right – my father is a hypocrite.”

“I’m not saying he’s a hypocrite...”

“I am.”

You can’t prove to me there’s a heaven and hell. People been dying for a long time but ain’t no one come back. Come to church – what for? To hear the preacher. I know what the preacher say, “The Bible says.” “Noah’s ark.” “Sex.” “People being bad.” Look, there were only two people after the flood – Noah and his wife. How did the human race get started up again? Incest.

A lot of them tell me, “I’m not gonna read the *Revolutionary Worker* because it’s getting down on religion.” When the *Worker* came out with the Pope on the front page and the hat he was wearing was a Trident missile, it turned a lot of people off. They quit buying the paper. They said, “We agree with what you’re saying about revolution, but we don’t agree with attacking the Pope. Making fun of that holy man. It’s not right.”

Well, look at what the Pope did in Mexico. He goes to the poorest section, says he knows that people are hungry, out of work, says that gives them time to be creative.

When the May Day Brigade went to Chula Vista College, one of the college kids said, "The workers don't want this."

I started talking about conditions in the US, depression, how I lost my house because the banks had redlined my neighborhood and I couldn't get a loan. In this country, Black and Chicano people had to spill their blood just to get into schools. Everything we got in this country, we had to spill our blood to get it.

When the May Day Brigade went to the meatpacking district, an older Black guy said, "I went and fought in World War II for freedom, so you could do what you're doing."

"How could you say that when you came back to a country where you couldn't even use the same water fountain as a white man. Freedom don't start 5,000 miles away. How can you talk about dying for this flag when a lot of the people behind it are KKK and Nazis?"

A Vietnam Vet said, "How can you say we died for nothing?" He started crying.

A girl from Honduras:

"Socialism is good in theory, but not in practice. Look at Cuba. They're starving."

"Look, you're from Honduras. Aren't they starving there?"

“Yeah.”

“Is that Socialist?”

“No.”

The US has got to keep saying that Russia is Socialist because they got to have a way to brainwash us and convince us that Communism is bad. The US still gets mileage out of the American revolution, going into third-world countries and saying, “Hey, we know where you’re coming from, ’cause we used to be a colony too.” Russia does the same thing too, cashing in on their revolution...

Union official at the meatpacking plant:

“Look at what they’re doing in Panama, they’re taking away our canal.”

“Where the hell is the canal? Is it in the US?”

“Yeah, but we built it.”

“They had slaves build it.”

“Well, it was our money.”

“You make any money from it?”

“What they oughta do is send the Marines over to Iran.”

“Maybe you think because the US gave you a gun and some shiny boots that you can walk all over other countries, but you go over to Iran, they gonna tear your ass. They got a cause and they’re ready to die for it.

“The boss got a right to make money.”

“Okay, I agree to that. They got the right to make money. They got the right to exploit us, do all this shit to us, but by the same token, we got the right to stand up and overthrow them.

When the Brigade marched out of the meatpacking district, we formed lines to march off. As we marched off, somebody fired a gun. We turned around and marched right back through there.

I remember the first time I went to a meeting of the Unemployed Workers Group, everybody got up and said who they were. When I heard the Revolutionary Communist Party, I started sweating. It took a lot to stay. I wasn't afraid of Communism so much as the government. Why is everybody so afraid of the government?

When I got thrown in jail, all kinds of thoughts went through my head. I started to wonder – maybe I'm being used by the Communists...

I started reading stuff, the *Revolutionary Worker*, etc. It was like when you turn on an old TV. First you see a lot of snow. Then you start to get a clear picture. They were hitting at the things I'd been asking myself about all my life.

When I lived in Watts, you had to run across Alameda to pay the phone bill across the street in Lynwood and then run back, because the cops and whites would run you out.

I'd never read much. It was a real struggle, but you have to have the experience – then you know what it's talking about right away. You gotta read. You can't just go to school and learn what they feed you. You gotta get out and read things, like Marx and Lenin and the *Revolutionary Worker*. You gotta read

about this shit, because they sure ain't gonna tell you about it on TV. You can't make revolution from your own front room looking at TV. You gotta be out on the street.

It's hard to make revolution, but it's not impossible. We used to have slavery, but we don't anymore. We got capitalism now, but all over the world things are changing. Maybe I won't see it, but my children will. My children will.

I don't care if we only have twenty guys out there. The line is what counts. If we're telling the truth about the way it is, people are going to listen.

It ain't a demonstration for more food stamps, for more crumbs. We're saying we want the whole cake.

People live in a constant state of fear. Fear of losing their job, afraid to take a day off. What I remember about Damian, he wasn't afraid. He wasn't afraid of anything.

Damian was very determined. He never lost his patience. He was a hard worker.

I remember when we got arrested at the Alamo, when they were booking us at the station, they said tell us your occupation. People said – steelworker, unemployed, etc.

Damian said, "Revolutionary."

"I can't put that down," the jailer said.

"That's what I am."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

On my last day in LA, Judy picked me up in the morning. We rendezvoused at a McDonald's with Mort and his crew and headed for the shantytown that they had discovered after the music festival in Watts.

We hit a typical LA wasteland – the ruins of a few industrial buildings scattered around a wide expanse of scrub bush, derelict cars and abandoned washing machines, etc. – the shantytown had grown up in the middle of this. The buildings weren't homemade from salvaged scrap, but they were only one step up from that. They appeared to be made out of stucco or cement, barely tall enough to walk into, and only one or two very small rooms with dirt floors. They couldn't have been built for human habitation. I wondered what their original function had been. Chicken coops? Dog kennels?

There were no lawns, but there were small well-kept gardens and no bits of rubbish anywhere in the yards. It was a workday, so there wasn't much activity outside the huts, a few kids riding around on bikes. Their numbers tripled almost the instant we arrived. As soon as we got out of the cars, we were surrounded by kids of all ages who wanted to know everything about us. Who are you? What are you doing here? You're the people who were here last Sunday, aren't you? Do you have more stickers? Can we have them? Can we have some of your red flags?

There were a couple hundred shacks and only six of us, so since there were no cops around and the sight lines were good, we decided it would be safe to go around singly. I say “We decided”, but I definitely wasn’t in on the decision.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “You guys all speak Spanish, I’ve got about two words...”

“You don’t need Spanish,” said a ten year old, mounted on his bike. “We will speak for you.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I really do speak only a few words...”

“Have a little faith in the masses,” said Judy.

“Yes, we can speak for you,” came a chorus from all sides.

In the end, there were more than enough kids to go around, and each of us went off escorted by our own personal band of translators – whether they were needed or not. There were about five kids with me, of varying ages. The number went up and down as kids disappeared or new recruits arrived. The two who stuck with me the whole time and did most of the translating were Pedro and Rosita.

Pedro was the ten year old on the bike who first spoke up – except he turned out to be twelve, not ten. Rosita, his sister, was a year older. Pedro did most of the talking. Rosita would step in to correct him occasionally, or take over entirely when he got lost or confused.

We walked from door to door, handing out leaflets, selling newspapers, with me learning bits of Spanish as conversations were repeated from door to door. By the end of the day, I almost had delusions of being bilingual. The first hut we called on was next door to Pedro and Rosita’s place.

“We have to start here,” said Pedro. “Carlos will be so glad to see you. He wasn’t here when you came around last Sunday.”

“It made him very sad to miss you,” Rosita told me.

Carlos turned out to be an old man, short and thin, with a leathery, weather-beaten face. It took him a long time to answer the door, because he walked slowly, with a cane. He didn’t live there alone, but his granddaughter and her husband were out at work.

His whole face lit up when he saw us, the newspapers, and the red flags the children were waving.

“Welcome, welcome, welcome,” he kept saying. He was one of the few adults that spoke some English, and the conversation was partly in broken English and partly in Spanish through Pedro and Rosita.

I showed him the *Revolutionary Worker* and talked about the Party and the May Day demonstration that was coming soon. He knew about May Day. He knew about it better than me. His oldest son had been killed on May Day, 1976, when the Mexican Army had opened fire on a student demonstration and killed hundreds.

“My son was a student,” he told me. “He had such a big heart. He wanted a good life for everyone. He was very brave, like you...”

“I’m not brave,” I said

“Yes you are,” he said.

“No I’m not.” I think I almost shouted this.

He smiled, like a man who knew better. “You are a revolutionary in *Los Estados Unidos*, the most powerful imperialist country on the earth. Of course, you are brave.”

Carlos bought a newspaper. He counted the money out in pennies and nickels. He took May Day stickers and promised his granddaughter and her husband would put them up at work.

“I can’t come on the march,” he said. “You would have to carry me. But I will tell everyone. Not many will come, I think. *La Migra*... you understand – it is very dangerous for us.”

Before we left for the next hut, Carlos had a long talk with Pedro and Rosita. One by one, he pointed to the huts on his row and said something about each of them. Then he threw his arms around me and embraced me like a long lost son. He told me again how brave I was. I started to believe him. I thought maybe I would change my life. As we went from hut to hut, I felt my spirit soar. Maybe I wasn’t so lazy and selfish, maybe I wasn’t the coward I knew I was.

In every hut we called on, someone bought a newspaper, counting out pennies and nickels and dimes. They hadn’t read all the books that I had; they weren’t as clear in all their ideas as Carlos seemed to be; certainly not all of them had lost a son to the revolution, but they told me so many stories of hardship and suffering, they were so open and loving and optimistic, and they all considered the red flag to be their flag. “It is the flag of poor people, fighting for a better life,” one young mother said to Pedro and Rosita.

At least, I think that’s what she said. The translations weren’t perfect in either direction. I found that out late in the day when I noticed a contradiction, noticed them translating a phrase of mine differently every time.

“But Mister,” said Pedro, “you’re using some big words that we’ve never heard before, like... proletarian. Sometimes we just have to take a guess.”

“But I think we get it right most of the time,” said Rosita.

I thought so too – and the newspaper and the leaflets were in Spanish, so any mistakes in the translation would be corrected. People got what we were saying – and they dug it. I lost count of the number of times I was hugged. And Carlos was not the only one who told me I was brave. I left the shanty town ashamed and proud that these people thought I was a member of the Party I had abandoned.

By the time we finished with the shanties, there were only a few hours to go before I had to be at the airport. We picked up my stuff at Bridget's. I left a thank-you note for her. Halfway to the airport, Judy pulled over into another McDonald's.

“Barbara wanted to talk to you before you left,” she said.

Barbara was waiting at a corner table with a cup of coffee. We got the same and joined her.

“So what have you accomplished while you were here?” said Barbara, getting right down to it.

“Well, I've got this book full of notes,” I said. I pulled out my notebook. It was big and thick. She looked impressed, and a little surprised. What did she think I'd been doing, I wondered.

“What are you going to do with it?”

“Write a play... like I said.”

“Why did you drop out, Fred? What did you disagree with?”

“I didn't have any big disagreements – no disagreements at all really. I just got tired, discouraged, lazy... and selfish. I want to be a writer. I've wanted to be one all my life.”

“You could write inside the Party.”

“Leaflets, newspaper articles...”

“Maybe that’s the kind of thing we need now.”

“Like I said, I got selfish.”

She was flipping through my notebook, not reading it, just glancing idly. Then she came to a section about halfway through that was blank. There were more notes on the other side of the blank section but she didn’t seem to notice. She left the book open there. It felt like a kind of indictment, as if she had caught me in a lie.

“I don’t think you can do it.”

“What?”

“You’re running away, Fred. I don’t think you can do anything good when you’re running away.”

There wasn’t much to say after that. I was determined to prove her wrong, but there was no point in arguing it. Only the finished play would prove things one way or the other. The three of us left McDonald’s together. When we split for our separate cars, Barbara said, “Good luck, Fred. I hope I’m wrong. I hope it’s a good play.”

Judy and I were silent the rest of the way to the airport. When we drove up to the main concourse, Judy turned to me and said, “She’s right, you know.”

“Judy, I thought you said I should do what was in my heart.”

“Yeah, but Fred, after all this, what’s in your heart?”

2. STALIN

My mother was like Stalin.

I caused a near fatality once when I said this. It was in the Comet Tavern a couple years after I'd left the Party. The guy I said it to had just taken a swallow of beer. When he'd stopped choking and had gotten his breath back, he said, "It was the way you said it, Fred – so sweet and innocent, like you were paying her a compliment."

But I was.

The first great figure of Women's Liberation was, for me, Joseph Stalin. Okay, I know this is beyond odd, but it made perfect sense in terms of my life.

Both Mom and Dad had fathers who worked in the coal mines. Both ran away from home. Dad ran away to Hollywood to become an actor. Mom ran away to secretarial school. So already we're seeing women's oppression and class differences getting mixed up together. Dad ran away to join the middle class. Mom's act of rebellion was channeled into... Well, maybe you could argue that the religious dimension was in operation here too. Mom's family was Catholic.

Dad's was Mormon. The Mormons believe very strongly that you should develop all your God-given talents. As they swept up from Utah into Idaho and Eastern Washington, they left behind them a trail of Community Theatre and Light Opera Companies – or they took over the ones that already existed. So running away to acting school, although it seems like a more adventurous destination than secretarial school, was really just going along with the program.

But Dad was infected with a lot of new ideas in Hollywood. We think he fell in with Communists back then. At any rate, by the time we were old enough to know him as anything other than the tall guy with the moustache, one of the first values we got from him was this openness to different things of any description: people, ideas, adventures...

We were raised to believe that, even as children, we had the inalienable right to ask, "Why?" And if the answer didn't make sense, we had the inalienable right to say, "But that's not logical." Astonishingly, some teachers didn't like being told by a nine-year-old kid that their brilliant explanation of something didn't really hold water. It was hard on us, harder still on the teachers, I imagine, and hardest of all on Mom.

I didn't really get this when I was growing up. Dad was just the guy who always said, "Yes," and Mom was the one who had to say "No." Dad was the guy who – when he was around – could play Socrates to our Plato... or Parmenides, or whatever. Mom was the one who had to deal with our non-stop arguments day in and day out. This wasn't because Dad was off working while Mom was stuck at home. It was just that Dad worked swingshift while Mom worked days, so she was home when we were.

Actually, Mom was the one who always had a job. Dad usually did. Dad's jobs were usually cooler: acting, broadcasting... for most of the time we were growing up he was a reporter on the local newspaper. Mom was a secretary, a super-smart secretary who ran an office that kept things ticking over for a bunch of idiot-savant PhDs at Hanford Atomic Works. But just a secretary. The work was steady, and it had great benefits, which came in handy when she got cancer of the lymph nodes and began her long slow descent into death.

I was fourteen when they told her she would die. I had an older sister who was away at college, and a sister three years younger than me. We also now had a little brother, age zero, who had just been born. That's how they caught the cancer so early – anomalies showed up on the prenatal tests. They told her that because they had caught it so early, she might live for as long as two years.

Mom didn't buy that. My little brother had just been born. She decided that she would live long enough for him to know his mother. She lived for ten years. Every year they told her it would be her last. She kept working right up until the last few months, not missing a day, except for when she had to take time off for radiation treatment.

I still didn't get it. My sisters did, of course, but I didn't – not until Women's Liberation exploded onto the scene at the tail end of the Sixties. By then I was an anti-war activist, an anarchist starting to move towards Communism. My Dad's ideas, which had seemed so radical and daring in the small desert town of Pasco, Washington, now seemed conservative and old-fashioned.

And my Mom... I had never got on well with her. She had been so negative, so critical of Dad, of me – of my sisters too, although I didn't realize that until talking to them years later. Now I started to look at the life Mom had led, a life

that would be over in a few years. I started to understand all the reasons for her bitterness... Not the right word. I don't know a right word. By then, I had read Engels saying that in the family, the man was the bourgeois and the woman was the proletarian. I got that. I started to appreciate that Mom had kept our family ticking over, just the way she kept the office at Hanford ticking over.

My Dad used to always say, "Don't worry, honey." Mom was the worrier. I blamed her for it all the time I was growing up. Now I understood that Dad didn't have to worry, because Mom did.

That was the Stalin connection for me. Just like Stalin, Mom was the one who got things done. She was the one who did the hard jobs. She had shouldered so many burdens that it made her hard – but she had done it out of love. I still couldn't talk to her, even when she was dying. I wanted to. I finally understood how much she loved me. I realized for the first time that I loved her. But we had not talked for so long...

The only change was that now I couldn't talk to Dad either.

3. THE PARTY

CHAPTER ONE

“Shall we grab that table?” said Charity. Ever the watchful scout, he had spotted a table just coming up about as far away from the loudspeakers as possible. The music was on full blast. It was hard to talk. But that was the idea: get in a noisy tavern and grab the quietest corner. Then no one could overhear.

“Let’s make a move,” said Gabe.

We headed for the corner. Another group that was closer seemed pretty interested in the table, but Charity was sitting there claiming it before they knew what happened. Gabe led the rest of us to consolidate possession. Gabe and Charity were good at teamwork. They’d been the driving force in the People’s Peace Treaty committee, which had just planned and led the second biggest series of anti-war demonstrations in Seattle history.

The first biggest had been the year before, when Nixon ordered the invasion of Cambodia and five protesters were killed at Kent State. Twenty thousand people had flooded onto the freeway that ran through Seattle like an artery. The

demonstrations this May had only been half as large, but we'd taken over the whole downtown area. We'd marched into the Seafirst Bank building – the monolith, as it was known – and shut the entire operation down from the inside. Things had changed since Kent State, and it felt like they would never change back.

By the time of the second demonstration, the battle for public opinion about the war had been decisively lost by Nixon and company. More than that, a large section of the country had lost any faith they might have had about the United States being a government of, for and by the people – regardless of who was in office. Nobody that year was talking about ending the war by replacing the conservative Nixon with a liberal Democrat – like who, Lyndon Johnson?

“Scratch a liberal and you'll find a fascist,” was by then a favourite saying.

“Alright,” said Gabe, while Charity unobtrusively kept an eye open in case anyone got too close. “You guys know most of this already, but I'm gonna run it down – the main points anyway – just to be sure it's clear.”

I leaned forward. Damn, it was noisy.

“Fred, you wanna change places with me?” said Charity. “I'd rather be on the outside anyway.”

“Okay.”

We traded places. Now I could hear without leaning so far forward. I guess it looked a bit less suspicious.

“First,” said Gabe, “organization. As you know, we're broken up into collectives and the collectives are broken up into workteams. The three of you will be in the Capitol Hill collective. You'll be in workteams that are responsible

for running the bookstore and organizing at Seattle Community College – but your central task for now will be finding jobs in industry,” said Gabe.

“Not gonna be easy,” said Mack.

“We know there’s a recession on. Do what you can.”

We nodded. Nixon didn’t give a damn about demonstrations or the student movement. If we were going to tap into any real power, we had to hook up with the working class. That was the first reason we were joining the Party – it was committed to working class organizing.

“What happens to the bookstore when we all get jobs?” said Mack.

“We’ll bring in people from other collectives to keep it going. Also, we hope you’ll succeed in involving some of the students you’re working with in keeping the bookstore open.”

“That’s the whole idea, isn’t it?” said Charity. “Get more and more people involved. Build the revolution.”

“Right on,” we said – but I could see Mack looked doubtful.

“Second point,” said Gabe. “As you know, the Party is a semi-secret organization. As far as the outside world is concerned, Charity and I are the only Party members in Seattle...”

“We don’t want to make it any easier for the FBI than we have to,” said Charity.

We all knew what he was talking about. Over the past few years, the Black Panther Party had been targeted for assassination by the FBI, and their organization had been decimated. We weren’t as big a threat to the United States government as the Panthers were, but we certainly aspired to be.

“I don’t get it,” said Mack, “People on the Peace Treaty Committee already have a pretty good idea who’s who.”

“Of course they do,” said Gabe, “but that’s not the same as knowing for sure.”

“You mean we’re supposed to pretend we don’t know anybody who’s in the Party except for you and Charity?” I said.

“You don’t,” said Charity. “Not for sure. And they don’t know you’re in the Party. Half an hour ago, you weren’t.”

“It can be a bit like ‘Spy vs. Spy’ in Mad Magazine,” said Gabe. “But as we get bigger, that’ll be less and less true.

“The thing is,” said Charity, “If we’re serious about revolution, we have to prepare for a time when the government will make a serious attempt to wipe us out...

“Which brings us to the final point,” said Gabe. “Guns... We don’t believe in urban guerrilla warfare – you know that – we believe now is the time for mass organizing. But our long term goal is armed insurrection, and in the meantime, we believe in armed self-defence. That means each of us has a responsibility to acquire arms and learn how to use them. I’ll let Charity run down what that means. He’s in overall charge of self-defence.”

We all figured that. Charity had spent some years in combat in Vietnam. He never talked about it, but we all knew it had fucked with his head. Charity was a Native American, and when the penny dropped – that he was doing to the Vietnamese what the US Cavalry had done to his own people – it dropped big time.

“Okay,” said Charity, “each of you are expected to acquire an M-1, a shotgun and a handgun.”

I think we both laughed. “Are we supposed to break into an armoury,” I said.

“No. Possession of stolen guns is a major bust, but you have a legal right to own a gun, as long as you buy it legally.”

I know we all laughed then. We were stone broke and he was talking about a fortune in armament.

“We know what guns cost,” Charity said. “We know you can’t rush out and buy all this shit right away. It’s a long term goal. But we do expect you to acquire one gun as soon as possible. There’s a lot of M-1’s about, and they’re pretty cheap. I can help you go shopping, Fred, and so can Mack, I think.”

Mack was a Vietnam vet too. He hadn’t been in front line combat, but he knew about guns, both from shooting and getting shot at.

“Yeah, I can help. You wanna just stick with M-1’s? What if we come across a bargain in one of the others?”

“Target of opportunity,” said Charity. “Take it.”

Mack shook his head. “An M-1, a shotgun and a handgun...”

“A revolution is not a dinner party,” said Charity.

“I know the quote,” said Mack. “But do you know how many books that would buy?”

“Mack,” said Gabe, “It’s not an either-or thing. The bookstore is a priority. A revolution is about consciousness, not guns.”

“Not only guns,” said Charity.

“Not even mainly guns,” said Gabe. “Mao says without a People’s Army, the people have nothing. But he also says, politics has to be in control of the gun, not the other way around. If people don’t know what they’re fighting for, it’s not a People’s Army and they aren’t going to make revolution.”

“Right on,” said Charity.

“I agree with all that,” said Mack. “I just can’t help thinking of all the books those guns would buy. We have so few books in the store. And they’re almost all Marx and Lenin and Mao. We need more – and we need more variety.”

“Mack,” said Gabe, “we’re gonna fill that store with books. We were so impressed that you started that store on your own initiative. We should have done that. And we’re going to learn from your example. Count on it.”

I stood up. “Who wants another beer?”

CHAPTER TWO

There were four of us at our first collective meeting. Besides Mack and I, there were two kids just out of high school, Tony Mazola and Joe Diablo. Tony was young, but he'd already done a lot of anti-war organizing. He'd read tons of books about Vietnam, Marxism... and drugs. He wasn't into drugs any more, but he had been, and Tony never did anything by halves. His junior year in high school, he'd taken a tab of acid once a day, every day, for the entire school year. Then he'd decided it was a waste of time and quit. Now he had nothing to do with drugs, not even grass, but every once in awhile, he'd stop talking in the middle of a sentence, stare off into space for half a minute or so, then continue on talking as if unaware that he had ever stopped.

Tony had built up quite a following in high school. Joe Diablo was the first of several who would follow him into the Party. Little Joey... we used to call him that when we wanted to drive him crazy. Actually, he was a pretty big boy, not as big as Mack who had played on the line in high school football, but big enough. The problem was, he had an incredibly young face – he looked like an overgrown twelve year old.

Tony and Joe had joined the Party about six months before us – actually before I even knew it existed. They'd been brought in from another collective because all four of us were going to try to get work in the shipyards. Tony had the

most experience, but I was older. Maybe that made a difference. At any rate, I was elected collective chair at the first meeting, and Tony was elected co-chair.

A couple weeks on from our first meeting, Gabe and Charity came to a meeting with a new recruit who would be joining our collective, Erin. We all knew her from anti-war work. She was a working class gal who had come down to Seattle to go to Seattle Community college. She had come into contact with the anti-war movement there and had thrown herself into it. She had played a really strong role in the People's Peace treaty committee, good at everyday organizing work, but also really committed to revolutionary politics and not afraid to fight for line.

“Fighting for line” was a phrase we used a lot in the Party. Chairman Mao had said, “The correctness of the political line determines everything.” We passionately believed that. Everyone in our collective was relatively new to the Party – actually the Party itself had only existed for a couple years – but we all had a fair bit of experience in the anti-war movement, and we'd had our fill of fast talking “leaders” with flexible principles.

The plan was that Erin would look for work in the garment industry. I suggested we talk to Party people in the Bay Area to get their advice, because there was an even bigger garment industry down there.

“Good idea,” said Charity, “if they'll talk to us.”

“Why wouldn't they talk to us?” I said.

“Because of the split.”

Gabe shot an irritated look at Charity.

“What are you talking about?” said Erin.

“It hasn’t been made public yet,” said Gabe, “But there’s been a split in the Party. Some of the long time members have left and started a new organization...”

“They’ve got more of an Eldridge Cleaver line,” said Charity, “putting more emphasis on getting ready for armed struggle, building up armed units, getting ready for underground actions.”

“Do you agree with that?” I asked Gabe.

“Not really,” said Gabe

“What about you, Charity?”

“I don’t know,” said Charity. “I think it’s pretty important to not lose sight of the fact that political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”

“So you agree with them?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that, but I do worry sometimes...”

“So we haven’t joined this new organization or anything like that? We haven’t actually split off?”

“Not exactly.”

“Not exactly... What does that mean?”

“Well,” said Gabe, “we were sort of started in Seattle by people coming up from Oregon, and they’ve all gone with the splinter group. So I think the rest of the Party might kind of think we’re with them.”

“I can’t believe this,” said Erin.

“When the hell were you going to tell us about it?” said Mack.

“Well,” said Gabe, “we’ve been talking about the best way to bring it up...”

“Gabe,” I said, “as far as I can see, you and Charity lied to us.”

Charity laughed. “Don’t hold back, Fred. Say what you really think.”

I don't know if they could hear it in my voice, but I was shaking like a leaf inside. Gabe wasn't bossy in the sense of going around giving orders, but he was definitely a heavy. Most of us hadn't been involved in the movement for more than a year or two. But there were some, like Gabe, who'd been with it pretty much all through the Sixties, who seemed to have read almost everything and knew how to use what they'd read in an argument. And I'd just called him a liar.

So I sat back and waited for the storm to hit. But Gabe just said, "You're right, Fred. I think I've been kind of liberal about this. I've been kind of afraid to deal with it all because I've been through so many splits in the movement"

What a relief. I had been gearing up to be flayed alive.

"Yeah, but we can't just flip one way or the other," said Charity. "We have to make a conscious decision."

"I agree with that," said Erin. "We're at some kind of crossroads here. I know what direction I want to go, but I think we all have to decide."

"Okay," said Gabe. "How do we go about it?"

I said, "I think we should send a delegation down to the Bay Area to investigate, then come back and make a report. But we should do it from the standpoint that we've never left the Party. We're not part of this new group, and we should make that clear. We're *not* going down to decide which organization to join; we're going down there to see if there is any reason to split from the one we're already in, the Party."

"Right on," said Charity.

Two weeks later, Gabe, Charity, Erin and I piled into an old beat-up Volkswagen and headed for the Bay Area.

CHAPTER THREE

The first stop was Oakland or Richmond, somewhere in the Bay Area that wasn't San Francisco anyway. We met a couple people from the national Central Committee. One was a tall guy, with short hair and glasses. He looked a bit like a basketball player. The other was a woman with long dark hair who did not look like a basketball player. The two of them lived in a normal house – which was sort of not normal for us – we were so used to living collectively in big houses with lots of rooms and long arguments about who did the dishes.

This was the first of what turned out to be several meetings with people in the Bay Area. They all followed the same pattern. We were greeted with... not suspicion, but caution. We made it clear that we considered we were still part of the Party. Then we talked about the work we'd been doing in Seattle.

The Bay Area people would listen intently, ask a few intelligent questions, commend our hard work and daring-do, and then say it was time to start organizing where power in society was concentrated – the working class.

We would agree and say, "That's why we joined the Party, and in fact, that's why we've come down here to link up."

The second meeting was in San Jose with John and Betty Gleason. If Gabe was a heavy, John and Betty were mountains. They stretched back through the Sixties to the Fifties and even to some of the great labour battles of the Forties. It

wasn't totally unusual to meet people in the movement who stretched back that far, but they tended to be white-haired anarchists, Trotskyite armchair intellectuals or old pro-Russian Communist Party hacks. These people were the real deal, steeped in revolutionary theory from Marx to Mao, veterans of some real class war battles, but not stuck in the past – they were committed to this new Party that had risen up out of the struggles in the Sixties.

The meeting started out the same way as the last. We gave our report; they said it's time to get out to the working class; we said right on. Then we got down to talking about the split with the new organization – the two-line struggle, as they put it.

“The basic question,” said John, “is how close are we to an actual revolution.”

“If it's right around the corner,” said Betty, “then the splitters are right. We should be stepping up our illegal work, building up arms caches, training in small group tactics, getting ready to build up funds by robbing banks...”

“But if they're wrong,” said John, “Then that's a recipe for revolutionary suicide.”

“We're in the middle of a great revolutionary upsurge,” said Betty, “not just in the US, but all over the world... France, China, Vietnam. But you have to make a concrete analysis of the situation here. Lenin says there are three elements necessary for a country to be in a revolutionary situation. First, things have to be so bad that people are ready to die to change them. Think about that – ready to die for a change. Second, the ruling class has to be unable to rule in the same old way. And finally, there has to be a Communist Party capable of leading a revolution... not just a bunch of people that call themselves a Party, a real Party with deep roots

in the working class, capable of leading an insurrection. Does that sound like the US today?”

“Of course not,” we agreed.

“And how far away are we from that kind of situation? Well, nobody has a crystal ball, and big changes can happen really fast, but they don’t fall from the sky. I think we can agree on two things...

“One, it’s coming. The U.S. isn’t going to be able to ride roughshod over the people of the world forever. And two, it’s not going to happen next year – or the year after. Things have a long way to go, and as a Party, we have a long, long way to go.”

“The thing is,” said John, “we don’t have such deep roots that we couldn’t be wiped out more or less overnight if the FBI really went after us.”

“Look at what’s happened to the Panthers,” said Betty. “And compared to us, they had really deep roots. Not that they didn’t make mistakes...”

“Their line about organizing the lumpenproletariat – the unemployed including street hustlers and petty criminals – instead of the working class was a big mistake,” said John. “But they had deep roots in the community, people who would die for them...”

“And a lot did,” said Betty. “Just about their entire first and second line of leadership is either dead or in jail.”

We were kind of overwhelmed by John and Betty. But also, they were knocking at an open door – at least as far as Erin and I were concerned. Gabe played his cards a little closer to his chest, and to be fair, he was looking at things on a more sophisticated level, but Erin and I were clear on a personal level. We’d

both been around Weather people. They'd tried to recruit us. The splinter group was too much like the Weather Underground. We weren't interested.

I think Charity had the hardest time figuring things out for himself. He'd grown up in poverty, and when he started working with the Party at the Free Store in Georgetown, he saw kids come in every day that could have been him. He read Mao talking about "serve the people" and he got it on a really deep level. It was what he wanted to do with his life. But he was so angry, killing angry, at what he had done in Vietnam – at himself for doing it, at the men who had sent him, and also, at what was going to happen to these kids he saw every day. What war would they be sent off to kill and die in?

Sometimes I thought of Charity as a kind of a human M-16, walking around primed and loaded – and praying, "Please god, give me a target, just point me in the right direction and pull my trigger." But that was me thinking in crazed Vietnam Vet Hollywood clichés. Charity was really just a nice kid, sweet and shy, who'd grown up in a hard world.

"I admire you, Fred." He said this to me in the car on the way back from the Bay Area. I was astonished.

"Why?"

"Because you stand up to Gabe."

"I see you arguing with Gabe all the time."

"About practical things. You argue about theory – like whether we should go with the splitters or not."

"Charity, I think you've read more books than I ever have."

"I read 'em. But you own 'em."

“I know what he’s talking about,” said Erin. “You grew up in a house with books, Fred. You talked about great ideas at the dinner table. Charity and I didn’t have any of that.”

“Doesn't seem to slow you down,” I said. “You fight for line as much as me.”

“Because I know how important it is.”

“I agree with what you’re saying,” said Gabe. “I get away with too much. It’s not good for the organization, and it’s not good for me personally. Everybody should be challenged, especially the leaders.”

I could see it was sort of true that I wasn’t afraid to take on Gabe. I’d spent a year on the local underground newspaper arguing with Weather Underground heavies who knew so much and used it so brutally that they scared the shit out of me. I’d learned to just close my eyes and wade in, trusting in other people to see through the rhetoric. Gabe wasn’t that kind of a bully. He wasn’t a bully at all, in fact. But it was scary arguing against him, and I was the kind of guy to do it anyway. Still, I couldn’t help thinking that he could be so magnanimous because I wasn’t a real challenge to him – so he could treat me as a kind of a pet.

When we got back to Seattle, we organized big discussions in all the collectives about the split. Overwhelmingly, Seattle wanted to stay with the Party.

4. SHIPSCALERS

CHAPTER ONE

We first heard about the Shipscalers from Bonnie and Clyde. I'd known them since the big anti-war demonstrations after the Kent State murders of the previous year. We'd joined a Seattle Liberation Front collective together. Arguments between the pacifists and the rock throwers had split the collective apart almost as soon as it formed, but we'd stayed friends ever since.

Clyde had scored a gig with the Shipscalers a few years back, and about a year later, he had brought in Bonnie. At the time, there were virtually no women working in the shipyards. There had been – thousands of them – during World War II, but when the war was over and the men came home, the women were shooed back into the kitchen. They weren't fired *en masse*, just squeezed out with harassment, discrimination and a massive propaganda campaign on the joys and duties of motherhood.

The Shipscalers was one of the few unions that still had women members – not many – but the few who were left were made welcome. Shipscaler

membership was about 80% Black, 10% Chicano and other minorities, 9% Capitol Hill hippie and about 1% straight white working class. The union took a strong stand in both the shipyards and the community against racial prejudice and any other kind of discrimination, including age and sex.

The shipyards were organized into craft unions – Painters, Pipefitters, Machinists, Boilermakers, Electricians... The Scalers were the union that did general labor. They did all the jobs that weren't claimed by the other craft unions. They scraped barnacles off the ships' hulls when they were in dry-dock – that's where the name came from – they also did sandblasting, jackhammering, shoveling, hauling, firewatching and general cleanup.

The Shipscalers had a union hiring hall. This meant that when a shipyard wanted to hire some laborers, they called up the union and the business manager would send out some members – whoever was on the top of the waiting list and present in the hiring hall at the time. If there weren't enough union members present to fill the job order, whoever else was in the hall would be sent out.

“What about could we join the union and get on the members list right away?” I asked.

“You gotta be working to join the union,” said Clyde. “But that's not a problem. You just gotta be there at the right time. They have job calls at 11 and 2:30 every day. You can call in an hour before to find out if anything's cookin'. Just keep checkin' it out. Sooner or later, they'll get a big order and there won't be enough members to fill it.”

“Once you get a job,” said Bonnie, “you gotta join the union whether you want to or not. And the initiation fee is a killer – \$150.”

“But you can pay it off in installments,” said Clyde.

“Do you have to pay in installments?” I asked.

“No.”

“So all we have to do is get one day’s work. Then if we could borrow the money from someone, we could join right away and be on the members list from then on?”

“You could, if you wanted to,” said Bonnie.

They didn’t necessarily get why we would want to do that, but then their whole way of relating to the Scalpers was different. For them, it was a source of high pay part-time work. They’d joined the union gradually, as work had trickled in, and once they’d joined, they only made the job calls when the wolf was at the door and they needed some quick bread. But we had visions of Big Bill Haywood, the Wobblies and the Red Socialists dancing in our heads. The Seattle General Strike of 1919 had started in the shipyards. Seattle had a grand old history of labor trouble, and we couldn’t wait to start some more.

Our collective decided that Mack, Tony, Joe and I would make our central task getting into the Shipscalers. Erin would continue to look for work in the garment industry. We talked about the idea of her joining the Scalpers. She could join up with Bonnie as a sort of a spearhead of feminists fighting to open up men’s jobs for women.

“That’s not why I joined the Party,” said Erin. “I joined the Party to organize working class women... Well, not just women, but you guys will be there in the shipyards already.”

We would... if we could ever get a job.

The four of us started calling in every day, twice a day.

“Got any jobs goin’?”

“Nope. Not a thing.”

“Got any jobs?”

“Nope. Not a thing.”

“Got any jobs?”

“I got twelve for Todds swingshift starting this afternoon and another twelve for the day shift starting tomorrow morning.”

We were down there in ten minutes.

The Scalpers was on 23rd and Madison, sort of on the border between the Central Area and Capitol Hill. It was a small one-story building, divided in two. One half was the office, where Quincy, the business manager, and his secretary worked. That was where to go if you wanted to pay dues, make a complaint or take care of any other business matter. The other half of the building was the hiring hall. It was a large room with about twenty benches.

Mack and I were the first ones there.

“Damn,” said Mack. “Maybe we got a chance.”

The next guy to come through was young – about our age – Black, heavy-set and strong-looking. He was dressed in old work clothes.

“Looks like a lotta work,” he said.

“Are you in the union?” I asked.

“Yup.”

“We’re not. Do you think we got a chance?”

“Hard to say. Been a long time since the last job call.”

By the time 2:30 came around, there must have been thirty people in the hall, young and old, Black and white, some in work clothes, some dressed pretty sharp. There was one young white woman who came in with what appeared to be her

boyfriend. They both looked like hippie types, and they both came dressed for work.

Bonnie and Clyde rolled in with seconds to spare.

“Hey, you made it,” said Clyde.

“Some of us did,” said Mack. There was still no sign of Tony or Joe. Okay, they lived farther away but this was their central task, getting work in the Scalers. Where the fuck were they?

“Lot of jobs going out today,” said Bonnie.

“Doesn’t look like it’s gonna do us much good,” I said.

“You never can tell,” said Bonnie. “Some of these people want day shift or nothing at all.”

Just then the window that connected the hiring hall to the business office opened up and Quincy poked his head through.

“I got twelve for Todds swingshift this afternoon and ten for dayshift tomorrow.”

“I thought there was twelve for dayshift?” It was an old Black guy sitting on a front bench who spoke.

“There was. But they called up and took two back.”

There was a general groan.

Quincy read from a list of names on a clipboard. The old guy on the front bench was the first name.

“You know what I want, Quincy. Don’t play me no games.”

“I’ll take that as a dayshift.”

Mack and I kept count as he went down the list. Most of the old-timers took dayshift. A lot of the younger ones – including Bonnie and Clyde – seemed to prefer swingshift.

“Late risers,” said Bonnie with a wink.

Once the dayshift jobs were gone, a couple guys said they weren’t interested when their names were called. By the time Quincy got to the end of the list, Mack and I had completely lost count.

“That’s it,” said Mack.

“I think there’s one more,” I said. “Looks like you might be lucky.” Mack had signed in ahead of me.

“There’s four more,” said Bonnie.

“How can you be so sure,” I asked.

“She never loses count,” said Clyde.

“But don’t get your hopes up,” she said.

“Why not?”

Quincy was saying, “Okay, any more members here that I didn’t call off?”

Nobody answered. Yippee! But instead of reaching for the non-members signup sheet, he kept reading names from his clipboard.

“Alright, paying in non-members...”

The first two names he read off were the hippie couple. They each took a job. He read another dozen names. No one else answered.

“You made it,” said Bonnie.

Quincy called out Mack’s name.

“Here,” said Mack.

Quincy looked him up and down. “You think you’re ready for Todds swingshift?” he said.

There was a murmur of laughter.

“I think so,” said Mack.

“Well, you better be sure,” said Quincy.

The laughter got a bit louder.

“I’m sure.”

“Then come up here and put your name down.”

When he called my name, I didn’t wait for an invitation. I walked up with a pen in my hand.

“You might be a little too ready,” said Quincy.

More laughter. I signed up. The window closed. People started filing out of the hall.

“Congratulations,” said Bonnie

“Well, you did it,” said Clyde. “You poor dumb fuckers.”

CHAPTER TWO

Headed south on the freeway from Capitol Hill, you're looking out over the whole damn Bay, the ships, the lights on the water, the miles of containers stacked up waiting beside the tall cranes – orange and green and brown against a dark blue sea and a grey cloudy sky. Then you turn right and you're headed straight for the south end of the Bay, Harbor Island, full of dirty old ships, cement plants, grain elevators and more dirty old ships locked away in the snarled traffic like some industrial version of a medieval fortress, the sludgy, black Duwamish River wrapped around it like a corpse-filled moat. It's breathtakingly beautiful – from a distance – but right now it felt like I was driving into hell, driving back into the past that I'd almost escaped from.

“Work hard and get a good education,” said my grandpa, “so you won't have to work like a dog the way I did all my life.”

But I was too smart for all of that. I had to drop out of college, become a hippie, an anarchist, and now a Communist signed up for the revolution. The road to hell was full of pot holes and it ended in a mud-filled gravel parking lot outside of Todd Shipyards. It was the middle of the summer, it hadn't rained in weeks, how the fuck could there be mud?

I got out of the car and locked it – as if anybody would be stupid enough to steal my pile of junk – showed my hiring slip to the guard and walked through the

gates into hell. Okay, it wasn't that bad. A lot of cool times were ahead. Just my luck I started work on the hottest day in twenty years.

I climbed the stairs to the Shipsalers locker room... lair... not sure exactly what you would call it. There was an office to the right where the Assistant Foreman and Quartermen hung out. Then there were lockers with benches in front of them. There was a table in the center of the room with a bunch of guys – mostly the old-timers – playing cards. I don't remember the game, not sure if I ever figured it out, all I know is it involved slamming your card down, and – if you were the gap-toothed lead man who appeared in my dreams for years after – shouting out, "Might be one!"

Mack and Clyde were already there.

"You didn't bring a lock either, did you?" said Clyde. "Damn, I meant to warn you about that. Makes no difference, you can both use my locker for tonight."

The locker room was full of men stripping down and putting on work clothes. Some of them were pulling on plastic hooded rain-gear, and then taping the ankles and wrists and face so no air could get in.

"God," said Mack, "They're gonna melt inside that."

"They're sandblasters," said Clyde. "They need it for protection."

"How do you get to be a sandblaster?" I asked.

"You don't wanna know," said Clyde.

"And you won't have to worry about it," said the guy next to us. It was the young Black guy who'd been the first one in the hiring hall after we got there.

"No offence," he said, "but they never put white guys down in the tanks blasting."

"It's true," said Clyde. "Austin and Gonzalo are racist as fuck."

The young Black guy was called Junior. He wasn't actually all that young, when I took a closer look, but he sure was big. I ended up on the same crew as him. Clyde and Mack were led off by the gap-toothed leadman who had finally stopped playing cards long enough to round up a crew.

This is the way it happens: Austin, the Assistant Foreman, meets with Gonzalo, the Quarterman, and they go over the job orders passed on from dayshift. Then they call in the leadmen, give them assignments, and the leadmen go out and round up a crew. Sometimes Gonzalo fields a crew too. Like tonight – he snagged Junior, me and four more of the new hires.

We walked past the tool room and I saw Bonnie and the other woman Scaler coming out of a door next to it.

“Are you working in the tool room?” I asked.

“Naw, that's where we got our lockers – the tool room is next door.”

“You don't need anything there,” Gonzalo said to us. “Just your big strong bodies.”

At the end of the pier was a very large, very old beat-up cargo ship. It was in the process of having its insides torn out. Todds was turning it into one big empty shell for transporting containers. We walked up the long gangway leading to the main deck, and then we climbed down a series of ladders to get to a refrigerator compartment at the bottom of a hold. The compartment was half torn up and there were chunks of Styrofoam fused with concrete in a huge skip that was less than a quarter full. There was a jackhammer, picks and shovels, and a couple of wheelbarrows.

“You wanna do the jackhammer, Junior?” said Gonzalo.

Junior grinned. “I'm trying to lose weight.”

Gonzalo nodded to the rest of us. “There you go, boys. Take it down to the bare metal.” Then he just leaned back and watched us knock ourselves out.

Did we ever. Except for Junior, it was the first night for all of us, and we wanted to be kept on permanent, so we attacked that concrete and Styrofoam like madmen. Junior would break loose huge chunks of the stuff, but the concrete had chicken wire mesh all the way through it, so we would have to take the picks and pry it the rest of the way free. Then we’d shovel it into the wheelbarrows and dump it in the skip. It would have been better if the insulation were solid concrete. Half and half meant you could never get your balance – it fought back against you like a living thing.

I thought I was going to die before lunch, but of course I didn’t. When the whistle blew, I dragged my sorry ass back out to the car where I’d stupidly left my lunch. I didn’t have the energy to climb up to the locker room, so I just ate there in the car and then parked myself by the water fountain next to the ship and drank about a gallon of water.

The second half was worse. The sun went down, but you couldn’t tell the difference – in fact it seemed to get hotter. The pile of rubble in the skip got higher and higher. We had to lay planks on it to make a sort of a highway to the top, then lift up the rear legs of the wheelbarrow and get a running start to make it all the way up. We should have been filling the wheelbarrows lighter and lighter as the pile got higher and higher, but we were too dumb for that.

Gonzalo just stood there watching us. Every once in awhile, he’d go off for a drink of water or to check out some of the other jobs. Then he’d come back and watch us some more. I think he found it kind of entertaining.

Towards the end of the shift the straw boss on the graveyard shift came down and started rapping with Gonzalo. I think he was a Quarterman like Gonzalo. They went off to check on the other jobs and then came back to watch us some more. I learned later that this was Lincoln Larry, probably the smartest guy in the shipyards. He knew a way to do just about any job going in half the normal time, but he always took the full time and demanded a full crew. Then he'd lay back with his crew, have a smoke or two and wait for the whistle to blow. Of course he wasn't about to tell Gonzalo's crew to work slower, but we could tell he was watching us, amazed and amused. Did that slow us down? Not a bit. We were racing for the finish line now, and we got that whole compartment stripped down before the final whistle blew.

Was Gonzalo impressed? Maybe. We did a two-day job in seven hours. As I learned later, that's called "Workin' yourself out of a job."

CHAPTER THREE

The next day I tracked down Tony and Joe and gave them merry hell for missing the call.

“It was my fault,” said Tony. “We’ve been calling in for so long without getting any results that I just sort of... lost focus.”

“We both did,” said Joe.

“But I’m co-chair,” said Tony. “I should have been on top of it.”

“You damn well should have,” I said.

They wouldn’t have got jobs anyway, since Mack and I took the last two, but I didn’t tell them that. I wanted to make sure that they didn’t miss any further calls. That’s what I told myself, but I think the truth is I was just pissed off because I’d worked so hard and still only got a day’s work out of it.

As it turned out, that was the beginning of a fairly busy time in the shipyards. There were a lot of job orders going out of the Shipsalers, although most of them turned out to be short term. We all got enough work to pay the stiff initiation fee and became full union members. This guaranteed a steady flow of short jobs.

But to get on permanent, you had to get ninety days straight in one place – ninety workdays, so about five calendar months without a break. If you were laid off and sent back out again, you went back to day one. Until you got on

permanent, the Union couldn't do much for you; the shipyard could let you go at any time for any reason.

I finally managed to get a long-term gig on the swingshift at Todds. I was getting close to ninety days straight, doing well, learning the ropes. The boss liked me, maybe a little too much. Austin had just picked me out for one of the easiest jobs in the Scalers – running a sandblast pot.

Sandblasting is pretty much what it sounds like – sand is blasted out of a hose at jet-like speed. The sand is made up of small grains of rock, the kind you find on an ocean beach, mixed in with fiberglass, lead and copper ore slag, and other nasty shit. It's used to clean up metal surfaces, cutting away the paint, rust, oil, etc.

Most large ships have a double-bottom hull. The space between the two hulls is a honeycombed structure of tanks. Some of the tanks are filled with diesel fuel or other ballast, some are left empty. When the ship is brought in for a major overhaul, the tanks are usually emptied, cleaned, sandblasted and repainted.

Todds and Lockheed were still using the old double chamber sandblast pots, three workers to a pot: two sandblasters and one pot tender. The pot was a steel, barrel-shaped structure, filled with sand. Compressed air was pumped into it from the ship's supply, and the air blasted the sand out through thick steel-webbed rubber hoses.

It was the pot tender's job to pull a lever on the hopper resting on top of the pot to release sand into the top chamber. Then he pulled another lever that sealed the top chamber. Then he pulled another lever that released the seal between the two chambers, so the sand could fall down into the lower chamber. Then, after twenty minutes to a half hour, when the pot was running out of sand, he would

close the seal between the two chambers, open the top chamber and fill it with sand again. And again. And again. So basically, the pot tender's job was to stand around for eight hours a day and pull some levers every now and then.

The sandblasters' job was to crawl through those double bottom tanks, dragging a heavy rubber hose behind them, and to systematically blast every inch of tank. Before they went down, they would put on industrial strength plastic rain gear, seal every opening with tape, draw the hood tightly around their head, pull on a monkey mask, into which was pumped compressed air as if they were deep-sea diving, and then pull on a thick rubber hood that covered their head and shoulders with only a small face opening to allow the goggles to peep out.

It was a tough dangerous job, and you had to be trained up to it, doing blasting jobs in the open air until you got your sweeping technique down and built up your confidence. I had asked to be trained as a blaster, but Austin and Gonzalo had just laughed at me.

"You don't want to go sandblasting, Fred," said Austin

"Yes, I do."

"You think you do," sneered Gonzalo, "but you'd be sorry once you got down in those tanks."

"Besides..." they might have gone on to say, "white boys don't do sandblasting. Black, Mexican, Chicano – they make good sandblasters. We'll give you something nicer."

Austin had been in the shipyards for a long time, since World War II, back when the Shipyards had a large number of white workers. He worked his way up through Scaler jobs to be assistant foreman, and during that time he had seen the Scalers Union become close to all Black. Nobody ever heard him say a racist

word, so far as I know, but everybody knew he was real glad to see white people coming back into the union, even if they were mostly long-haired, bearded, Capitol Hill hippies. And here I was, beard shaved, hair cut, a reformed hippie, no wonder he liked me.

Austin gave me the “good news” about the pot-tending job an hour into the shift. I was in a crew hauling scrap metal, when he climbed down to the bottom of the hold I was in and said, “I’ve got another job for you. Come on.” I followed him up the ladder and back down 200 feet into the next hold where the sandblasters were clustered around one of the sandblast pots. It was January now, and after the hottest summer on record, we were having the coldest winter on record. There were gas burners propped up against each of the sandblast pots, tilted so their flame was hitting the air pipes coming out of the bottom.

“What’s going on?” said Austin to Jacob. Jacob was the main pot tender on swingshift. He’d spent years blasting in the double bottoms. Now he was up on top. He knew pretty much everything there was to know about sandblasting.

“The pipes were frozen,” he said.

“It’s been an hour,” said Austin. “They ought to be thawed out by now.”

“I reckon they are,” said Jacob. He nodded to the blasters. Two of them, Miguel and Sandy, ambled over to the tank entrance – basically just a round hole cut into the deck – and started to pull on their monkey masks and hoods. The other two blasters, Bobby and Junior, stayed by the pot.

Jacob said, “We still need another pot tender.”

“I want you to show Fred here the ropes.”

Jacob just nodded. He didn’t say anything, but Bobby did.

“He doesn’t know anything about sandblasting. Why don’t you get one of us blasters to do it. I’ve been down in these tanks long enough.”

“You know I can’t use you, Bobby. You’re going to be a leadman again as soon as we add on more crew.”

“What about Junior, then? At least he’s been down in the tanks for a week.”

Junior had just started back at Todds a week ago. I hadn’t seem much of him since my first job at Todds, when he’d picked up that jackhammer and thrown it around like a toothpick. This was his first time down in the tanks, but he’d been in the Scalers for a couple years, and he had experience blasting on the dry-docks.

“I need Junior blasting,” said Austin. “He came out here as a blaster. That’s why we hired him.”

End of conversation as far as Austin was concerned. He climbed back out of the hold. Bobby and Junior pulled on their monkey masks, gloves and hoods, and climbed down into the tanks. Nobody said anything about the real issue – I was white, they were Black. All the sandblasters were Black except for Miguel, who was Mexican.

“Gimme a hand with this,” said Jacob.

I helped him place a large fan over the tank entrance. It was too heavy for one person to lift and it blocked the entire entrance. Then we went over to the far end of the hold and stuck a giant sucker hose down through the other tank entrance.

“Once they start blasting,” said Jacob, “you can’t see a damn thing down there for dust. So we blow into one hole and suck out the other – try and get a little windstorm going.”

We went back to the fan. Jacob took a wrench out of his back pocket and banged on the metal guard around the whirring blades.

“We gonna start up,” he yelled down into the hole.

Bobby yelled back. “Let ’er rip.”

Jacob flipped the toggle switch on the fan and it came to life with a whine and a roar.

“We oughta have a cover-up man standing by that fan,” said Jacob. “The pots are too far away for us to hear if anything goes wrong.”

“Why don’t they have one?” Dumb question. Jacob just snorted.

For the next couple hours, I learned the ins and outs of tending pot: how to keep the pot running non-stop, how to tell when it was almost out of sand, how to get the rigger’s attention and help him hook up the empty hopper so the crane could pull it out and lower down a replacement, how to guide the new hopper into place and – when necessary – beat it with a lead pipe to get the sand moving. I learned to keep a weather eye on the air pot, and to make sure the thin rubber hoses connecting it to the monkey masks never kinked up and cut off the air supply.

Jacob was easy to talk to – but not with.

“I didn’t ask for this job,” I told him.

“I know.”

“I don’t suck up to Austin.”

“I know.”

“I just show up and do my job.”

“You just trying to keep on here like the rest of us.”

“I’m just trying to get on permanent.”

“I know.”

I pulled out a cigarette and offered him one.

“No thanks,” he said, taking out a worn tobacco pouch. “I smoke roll-ups.”

“So do I when I’m at home. I just smoke tailor-mades on the job.”

“You poor kid,” said Jacob. “You got that just backwards. You should be smoking tailor-mades at home. When you on shipyard time, that’s when you want to be sitting back to make a roll up.”

As it got on toward lunch, he started to loosen up and talk about the union. He knew Quincy and Reuben from way back. Reuben was the president of the Scalers’ Union Local. He worked as a sandblaster at Lockheed across the canal from Todds. He was a shop steward there and was said to be a real fighter. He’d led walkouts there, something Mack and I dreamed about – real union militancy. He was also said to be a Communist of sorts, a member of the old pro-Russia Communist Party. It seemed hard to believe, because Communists are supposed to be atheists, and Reuben was a Bible-thumping Christian, but then, we didn’t rate the old CP much. The Soviet Union – in our considered opinion – had obviously stopped being Communist a long time ago and was now just another imperialist superpower.

“Yeah, I been knowing Reuben way back when he was an alcoholic.”

“Reuben was an alcoholic?”

“He had it bad, a falling down sloppy drunk alcoholic he was.”

“Hard to believe.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“But he doesn’t drink now, does he?”

“Not a drop.”

“What happened.”

“He found Jesus.”

“And that saved him?”

“Surely did. He stopped drinking and started fighting, and that man been fighting ever since.”

“What do you think of Quincy?”

“He a smart man.”

“Do you think he’s a good Business agent?”

“He a smart man.”

“Do he and Reuben get on?”

“Why you ask that?”

“Well, I’ve been to a couple union meetings and it seemed to me there was a little friction.”

“Might be Reuben think he should be the business agent.”

“What do you think?”

“He a fighter...”

Suddenly the air was filled with sand, spattering against our faces, into our eyes, our mouths. I didn’t know what the fuck was going on, but Jacob knew right away. He ran to the fan, kicked the toggle switch off and threw the fan over onto its side.

“Gimme a hand here,” he yelled at me.

Bobby was pushing Junior up out of the hole. Both of them had their hoods and masks off. Junior’s eyes were open, but he didn’t seem to be responding. Jacob and I grabbed him under the arms and pulled him out. He came out trailing blood. His right leg was a mass of torn raingear, jeans, and tissue, covered in blood with sand sticking to the whole mess.

Bobby jumped out and started waving at the crane operator, trying to get his attention, but he was way up above us and in the middle of another job.

“Run up there and get the rigger,” yelled Jacob. “Tell him to send down a stretcher.”

I flew up the ladder. When I got to the top deck, I couldn’t find the rigger. I ran around like a chicken with its head cut off for about a minute yelling, “Where’s the rigger! Where’s the rigger.”

I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Pete the Hook, a rigger, but not the one assigned to our crane.

“What’s up?” he said.

“We got a blaster down there hurt real bad.”

He leaned over the side of the hold next to ours, put two fingers to his lips and did one of those shrill whistles that I’d always wished I could do. Our rigger was down below. It looked like he was hooking up a welding machine to pull it out. He looked up to see Pete making a couple hand signs. Right away, he disconnected the welder and signaled the crane operator to pull out.

Pete the Hook was an old-timer. He used to be a lumberjack and like most ex-lumberjacks, he was missing something, a hand in his case – hence the name. But both his legs worked fine, and he was down that gangway and opening up the first-aid cabinet on the dock so fast I had to run to catch up with him.

“Can I help?” I said as he was pulling out the stretcher.

“Get lost.”

I stayed out of the way and watched long enough to see I just would have slowed him down. Then I ran back up the gangway and climbed down into the hold. By the time I got down there, the crane had lowered the stretcher and they

were strapping Junior into it. There were a couple first-aid workers who had wrapped his leg to slow down the bleeding. I could hear sirens in the near distance. All the blasters were out of the hole and watching silently as the stretcher rose up and disappeared over the side of the ship.

The minute it disappeared, Bobby said, "That goddamn fan."

"I know," said Jacob.

"I screamed. I screamed as loud as I could. You couldn't hear me."

"I know."

"I had to leave him there bleeding and crawl back to get the hose and spray it up into the fan to get your attention."

"Is not your fault," said Miguel. "They do not give us a cover-up man."

"No goddamn cover-up man," echoed Sandy.

"That's right," said Jacob.

"I had to leave him there bleeding," said Bobby.

Bobby and Junior were both running off of my pot. I wondered if I had done something wrong, if I had caused the accident. Miguel seemed to read my mind. He threw an arm around me, "Don't worry, my friend. Is not your fault."

Bobby stared at me real hard for minute. Then he said, "No. It wasn't your fault."

"We should'a had a cover-up man," said Jacob.

CHAPTER FOUR

On the other side of 23rd Avenue from the Scalers hall was a mini-shopping village. There was a Rexall drug store there that was just a normal branch, like any other as far as I could figure out, but inside they had the coolest record collection I'd ever come across. They had record labels I'd never heard of before, like *Yazoo*, and *Arhoolie*, vintage collections of Delta blues, famous guitar pickers like Robert Johnson, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Mississippi John Hurt and Elizabeth Cotton. They also had names that were completely new to me, like Bo Carter, to my ear the best guitar picker who ever lived.

I spent almost as much time at the Rexall record bin as I did at the Scalers union hall. I was in there Saturday morning, killing time, waiting for Bonnie and Clyde, when Bobby walked in. He looked surprised to see me.

"I thought you weren't coming," I said.

"I wasn't... I'm not. I just stopped off here to fill a prescription."

"Don't you live in Rainier Valley?"

"I was visiting my uncle."

"An early Saturday morning visit?"

"What's wrong with that... Okay, maybe I wanted to check it out, see who was coming."

It was three months since the sandblasting accident at Todds swingshift. I was still there – I'd got on permanent. Junior was still in the hospital. He was going through a long series of skin grafts and operations on his leg. They thought he would probably walk again someday, but it wasn't a sure thing – and at best he would need a cane.

Bobby made regular visits and kept us informed. He and Junior were cousins. Bobby had a lot of cousins. It was because of Bobby's reports that we'd all agreed to come to the union meeting this Saturday and raise some hell. But then at the last minute, Bobby had pulled out. He said it would be a waste of time.

The rest of us had decided to meet at the Rexall.

"Bonnie and Clyde are running late," I told Bobby. "I'm waiting for them. Everyone else is inside. The whole sandblast crew is there, except for you."

"Well... as long as I'm here, maybe I'll take a look. I haven't been to a meeting in a long time."

"That's great," I said. "Bonnie and Clyde should be here any minute. I was just checking out the records here, they've got some great blues."

Bobby flipped through a few of the albums. "This is all hillbilly music. You interested in this hillbilly shit?"

I didn't know what to say. He was talking about my blues heroes. Just then Bonnie and Clyde came into Rexall looking for me.

"Sorry we're running late," said Clyde. "Bit of car trouble."

"Hey, Bobby, you came too – that's great," said Bonnie.

"I see you found the treasure trove," said Clyde, nodding toward the record bin. He was from South Chicago and knew everything about the blues.

"You like this hillbilly shit too?" said Bobby.

Clyde laughed. “You don’t appreciate your own heritage, Bobby. This is where it all started.”

“Yeah, but some of us come down out of the hills a long time ago.”

“Shouldn’t we get goin’?” said Bonnie.

The meeting was underway by the time we came in. There were about twenty-five Scalers at the meeting, mostly old-timers, mostly Black, but there was a scattering of young and different races. Jacob was sitting in one corner of the room. Sandy and Miguel were sitting next to him, as was the new blaster, Pruitt. The rest of my workteam – Mack, Tony and Joe – were there too, sitting in the next row.

There was a table set up at the front of the meeting. Reuben and Quincy were seated behind it, facing us. Reuben had a gavel in his hand, which he used freely to keep order in the meeting. Quincy was taking notes on a pad of yellow legal paper. That was a bit of a surprise – usually his niece was there to do the clerical work.

We took a seat in the back row, next to the rest of the sandblast crew. Jacob looked at Bobby, surprised. “I thought you wasn’t coming,” he said in a half whisper.

Bobby shrugged.

Miguel said out loud, “I knew he come. Bobby madder than any of us.”

Reuben glared at Miguel for talking, but he was already busy telling Phil – an old-timer from Lockheed – that he was out of order.

“I ain’t even said nothing yet,” said Phil.

“I know what you’re gonna say and it’s out of order.”

“How can you know what I’m gonna say until I’ve said it?”

“How come...” said Quincy, doing a pretty good mimic of Phil’s voice. “How come we got so much office help? Why don’t we got a bigger treasury? Where’s our dues money going?”

“Well, where is our money going?”

“You’re out of order,” said Reuben. “What I gotta do, beat you over the head with a stick?”

“You can’t talk to me like that, Reuben. You ain’t the only one can start a lawsuit.”

“I’m gonna have to cut you off, Phil,” said Reuben. “First of all, you out of order. Second of all, this meeting’s getting to be a lot bigger.” Reuben turned to us. “I’m especially glad to see some of you younger members taking an interest in the union. Some of us that been active are getting to be old-timers. Our business agent gonna retire in a year...”

“I’m old enough to retire in a year,” said Quincy. “Don’t mean I have to.”

“You better not be backing out on that promise, Quincy.”

“Now who’s out of order?” said Phil.

“Didn’t say I wasn’t retiring,” said Quincy. “Just said I didn’t have to.”

“Like I was saying,” said Reuben, “Quincy’s gonna retire in a year and I’m gonna retire in five years. That’s why we need some of you younger members to step forward and take our place.”

“Just try and take their place,” said Phil, “and see who yells.”

“You out of order, Phil.”

“I’m always out of order.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” said Quincy.

Phil was one of those annoying people who come to meetings and use them as their own personal group therapy session. But Phil being there did have one good side effect – when he got going, Reuben and Quincy would have to stop arguing with each other long enough to shut him up.

“Old business,” said Reuben, banging his gavel on the table like he wished it was Phil’s head.

“We ain’t got any more old business,” said Quincy.

Bobby stood up then and said, “I got some old business. I want to talk about that sandblast accident at Todds swingshift.”

“That’s new business,” said Quincy.

“Happen almost three months ago,” said Bobby. “The union still ain’t done a damn thing about it and it’s getting old fast.”

“Bobby,” said Reuben, “I’m afraid that don’t make it old business. It has to be brought up at the last meeting to be old business.”

Bonnie stood up and said something then, but her voice was so quiet that I couldn’t make it out.

“I’m sorry, Miss...” said Reuben.

“My name’s Bonnie.”

“I’m sorry, Bonnie, but you gonna have to speak up so we can all hear you.”

“Well, Quincy said there wasn’t any more old business. Doesn’t new business come next?”

“I believe you right,” said Reuben. He pounded his gavel again. “New business. Go ahead Bobby.”

“We got a brother can’t be here, ’cause he’s still in the hospital. He’s in the hospital ’cause of an accident never should of happen...”

“You right there,” said Quincy. “I keep telling you blasters, you can’t tape that dead man switch into the open position. Whole reason you got a dead man switch is so if you lose control of the hose, it’ll cut off automatically.” Quincy was repeating the company line. The dead man switch was basically just a trigger. It was just too difficult to hold it down for seven hours while you dragged the hose through the double bottoms and fought with it to get the nozzle pointed in the right direction. All the blasters taped it open.

Bobby ignored Quincy and kept going. “He nearly died down there in that tank. I couldn’t get the fan off from the bottom and there was no cover-up man to pull it off from the top.”

“That’s right,” said Jacob from the corner. “Should’a been a cover-up man.”

There was a murmur of assent from just about everyone in the room.

“We tried to get you to do something, but you didn’t even fucking answer us.”

“Now Bobby,” said Reuben. “We’ll have none of that kind of language in the hall here... But I appreciate what you’re saying, and I think it’s a darn good question. Why didn’t you answer them, Quincy?”

Quincy started looking through his appointment book. “Wait a minute. Just when did you make this complaint?”

“The day of the accident,” said Bobby. “The day before the accident. Every day of the week after the accident.”

“Let me check here,” said Quincy. “No wonder. That was the week I was back at the International. You must have talked to Smitty, and he never give me the complaint.”

“Who’s Smitty?” I said. All the time I’d spent hanging out in the office, I’d never even heard of him.

“I tell you who Smitty is,” said Reuben. “He a personal friend of Quincy’s. Don’t have no official connection to the union. Ain’t never been elected to nothing. Ain’t never been appointed to nothing. Now when Quincy go out of town, the by-laws say that the President supposed to come in, take over the office, and get paid for it ‘till the business agent get back. But Quincy don’t wanna do that. He wanna bring in his own personal friends, who don’t know nothing about grievances, or OSHA or the NLRB...”

“I leave you in the office,” said Quincy, “you spend the whole treasury on lawsuits ‘fore I get back.”

“That’s why don’t nothing be done about safety or anything else around here,” said Reuben. “We got a business agent don’t pay no attention to the by-laws. He just do like he want.”

Phil saw his chance to get back into the argument. “Now the shoe’s on the other foot,” he said. “When I complain about the financial report, I’m splitting hairs, but now you talking ‘bout the by-laws ‘cause you can’t get what you want.”

“I don’t care about the by-laws, the financial report or any of that shit.” Bobby was yelling by now. “What kind of chance do we got when our own union let the company walk right over us any time they feel like?”

“Now calm down, Bobby,” said Reuben. “You got a good point there, but you gotta calm down about it...”

“Ain’t that something,” said Quincy, “when a member can walk into his first meeting in over a year and start running down the union representation just like he know all about it. This may be news to you, but the union can’t afford to fight for a cover-up man for sandblasting. Don’t no other shipyard on the West Coast use a

cover-up man. Don't no other Labor Union Local even got jurisdiction over sandblasting. Painters got it ever' other city on the coast."

I'd heard this speech before. Probably everyone had. It was Quincy's theme song. There were nearly a dozen craft unions in the shipyards, each one of them on the lookout for ways to expand their jurisdiction and increase the number of dues-paying members. Quincy believed we had to lie low and not make ourselves an easy target for other unions to poach our work.

"So what are you saying?" I asked Quincy... "That we should be competing with every other union in the shipyards for who'll work in the dirtiest, most unsafe conditions?"

"Maybe we ought to ask them would they mind paying us a bit less," said Bobby.

"I think the brothers got a good point here," said Reuben. "And I like to make a motion that our business agent contact Todd Shipyards first thing Monday morning and set up a meeting to talk about this."

Jacob stood up in the back row. "I second that."

"We don't need to be talking," said Bobby, "we need to be walking. The only way we gonna get a cover-up man is for them to not get no work done until we do."

"You talking 'bout a work stoppage," said Quincy. "We got a no-strike clause in our contract."

"I didn't sign no contract," said Bobby.

"You sign up in the union, didn't you?" said Quincy.

"There's a motion on the floor already," said Reuben. "All those in favor?"

"In favor of what?" yelled Bobby.

But the rest of the hall was already saying “Aye”. The motion passed.

So we had a meeting set up now, but we wanted more. The cover-up man was the big issue, the one that had got everybody to come to the meeting, but there were a lot of other issues about health and safety, about working with fiberglass and asbestos – and about firewatches.

“Firewatches?” Reuben perked up. That was his thing. He’d led a walkout at Lockheed over firewatches.

“I’ve been at Todds for three weeks so far this time out,” said Bonnie, “and I’ve been on firewatch every single day.”

“Lucky you,” said Phil.

“Lucky me? You think so? It’s boring as spit.”

“I guess it would be,” said Reuben.

“I can work as good as any man, and I’m tired of being treated like a pussy.”

“Now, now,” said Reuben. “Language.”

“That’s not bad language,” said Clyde. “She’s just telling it the way it is.”

“It also means I’m the first one to get laid off – and it’s not just me. They do this to all the women who come to Todds. There’s a few that don’t mind it, but most of us hate it. So... what are you gonna do about it?”

“It’s gonna be stopped,” said Reuben

“It surely is,” said Quincy.

They spoke as one on this, at least. There was no discrimination in the Scalpers – although not necessarily every single member was on board with it....

“I don’t know,” said Phil. “Just stand around and watch the sparks fly all day... Mmm-mm, sounds pretty good to me.”

“Phil,” said Reuben, “you have got to get with the times. The basic principle of a union is that we are brothers and sisters and they got to treat us all equal. Isn’t that right, Quincy?”

“Absolutely,” said Quincy.

“If there’s no other business...” said Reuben, and he raised his gavel.

“Just a minute.” Jacob spoke up from the back row again. “We need a shop steward out on swingshift.”

“Oh yeah,” said Reuben, “We done forget about that. I think you gonna make a good steward, Fred. I’m glad to see you stepping forward.”

“What?”

“Well, you done the most talking. I reckoned you were stepping forward.”

“I’m too new at Todds. There’s lots of people would make a better steward than me.”

“Bobby make a good steward,” said Miguel.

“Not a chance,” said Bobby.

“What about you?” said Quincy to Jacob. “You the one been around the longest... know the most about the union.”

“I reckon Fred’s the man for the job. He’s the one pushed us to come here and get something done about what happened to Junior.”

“Is true,” said Miguel. Sandy nodded.

“That’s right,” said Clyde. “He’s got the most important job qualification of all.”

“What’s that?” said Reuben.

“He’s dumb enough to take it.”

Amidst the general laughter, Bobby stood up and said, "I nominate Fred for shop steward."

"I second it," said Jacob.

The motion passed without opposition. Reuben was fixing to end the meeting again, but I stopped him.

"I just want to be clear about one thing. Your motion didn't say who would be at the Todds meeting from the union side. We want an open meeting.

"There's only so much room in that office," said Quincy.

"I don't think you have to worry about too many people showing up," said Bobby. "No, I don't think you have to worry about that at all."

"And if too many do come," said Reuben, "Todds'll just have to find a bigger room. This is our union, not theirs."

Quincy opened his mouth to object, but Reuben slammed the gavel down.

"Meeting adjourned."

Bobby was out of the hall like a shot as soon as the gavel hit the table. I ran after him. "Wait a minute," I said. "Don't you want to talk about the meeting?"

"I'm late," he said. "Nothing to talk about anyway. I'll be there."

Jacob came out and clapped me on the back. "Now you the shop steward. Show 'em what you got."

"I'm just a mouthpiece," I said. "We got to show 'em."

"What I meant," said Jacob as he sort of melted into the crowd of older Scalers catching up on the gossip.

"Good luck," said Clyde. "Keep us both posted."

"Let me know when the meeting is," said Bonnie. "I'll be there."

"Want to make some plans now?"

“It’s Saturday,” said Clyde. “Take a day off, Fred.” They headed for the parking lot across the street. I was looking around for Miguel and Sandy when Reuben laid his hand on my shoulder.

“I agree with what you and Bobby trying to do, but I think you getting off on the wrong foot. You can’t just drop a walkout on people like that. You got to build up to it. I know, I led a walkout.”

“Over firewatches, I heard.”

“That’s right. They weren’t setting firewatches on the dry-dock, so we set up a meeting and give ’em our demand, and they give it back and told us exactly what we could do with it. So we filed a grievance, and when we won that and they still wouldn’t do it, we took it to court and the court said we was right, and Lockheed still didn’t set up no firewatches. That’s when we walked out. And everybody stayed out with us, ’cause we done prove we was right.”

“It’s a wonder the shipyard didn’t burn down first.”

“You can laugh, but the fact is we won. And if you want to know how to win, I’m telling you. And I tell you something else. You ain’t never gonna win with the business agent we got in there now.”

“I heard you wanted to be business agent.”

“It ain’t about me, Fred. It’s about what’s right. Do you think that man gonna back you up?”

“Probably not,” I said. “But it’s not about that either. It’s about us at work getting together and doing things for ourselves.”

“It surely is,” said Reuben. “That’s the most important thing – when you can get it.”

CHAPTER FIVE

I was pretty excited about being made shop steward – too excited, really. Erin warned me about it at the collective meeting that Sunday. It was her last meeting in our collective. They had started hiring in the garment industry and she was going to be chair of a new collective of women comrades who had gotten work there.

“Don’t forget,” she said. “A union is a bourgeois institution.”

“I thought your dad was a union man,” I said.

“He was,” said Erin. “So I know what I’m talking about. So do you, Fred. A union is only ever a way of getting a better deal out of capitalism – it’s not about getting rid of it.”

“I know that,” I said. “Being shop steward isn’t the big goal. It’s just a way of getting things started.”

“You’re right. It is a good start. Just... be careful.”

But the mistake had already been made – by all of us, really, including Erin. It was a mistake we had to make. We were trying to reproduce the great struggles of the Thirties and Forties in the U.S. and move on from there to revolution. It was never going to happen – not like that. We needed to learn from those days, not repeat them. But the important thing was, we were making a start.

Monday morning, Quincy called Todds and arranged the meeting for Wednesday afternoon, an hour before the shift would start. I made sure everybody on swingshift knew about it, but aside from Quincy and I, only Bobby and Sandy turned up from our side.

Jacob didn't show up.

"No surprise," said Bobby. "He's not one for a confrontation."

Bonnie and Clyde weren't there either, but that was even less of a surprise. They and most of the recent wave of new hires had been laid off the day before. Bobby was convinced it was because Quincy had tipped off Austin, but I wasn't so sure. I couldn't see the percentage in it for Quincy. Bonnie's presence would have fit right in with his tactic for the day – hit hard at the easy stuff and slide away from the big things. Putting an end to the discrimination against women Scalers was an easy hit. It wouldn't cost Todds anything, just chip away a bit at Austin's old world view of the fairer sex.

"The thing is," said Quincy as the meeting opened, "the Shipscalers Union will not allow any form of discrimination against its members. Those days are past, they're gone for good. You have to give our female members the same kind of consideration you give to every other member."

"I was trying to be considerate," said Austin. "Do you really want these young women crawling around in the double bottom tanks scraping diesel fuel off the bulkheads?"

"They might not like what the diesel does to their fingernails," said Gonzalo.

"With respect," said Quincy, "it's not your place to worry about nobody's manicures. We can take care of our own fingernails, male or female."

"Alright," said Austin. "If that's what they want..."

Chalk one up for the Scalpers.

But when we got to the question of sandblasting, everything came to a dead stop.

“Let me say right off,” said Austin, “nobody feels worse about that accident than I do. But we can’t give you a cover-up man at every hole – you’re talking about having a man stand there doing nothing for eight hours a day.”

“I guess it’s pretty crazy,” said Bobby, “To think a man’s life is worth a whole eight hours of pay.”

“Now let’s don’t blow things out of proportion,” said Austin. “Nobody died in that accident.”

“And we’re here to make sure nobody does,” said Quincy.

At this point, to everybody’s amazement – well, mine at least – Bobby stood up, stared at Quincy with a look that was so evil I was surprised he didn’t melt him, and then walked out of the meeting without saying another word.

It kind of took the wind out of our sails. The result probably would have been the same anyway, but it was Bobby who had made all the running about sandblasting. Without him there arguing the case, it was a sure thing that nothing would happen. I turned to Sandy as soon as we were alone and said, “Why did he do that?”

“You didn’t see, did you?”

“Didn’t see what.”

“Quincy winked at Austin.”

“So?”

“You don’t get it? He winked at him. He as much as said, ‘This don’t count – we’re just putting on a little show for the boys.’”

“He said all that with a wink?”

“It was a mighty expressive wink.”

The whole sandblast crew had already left for the ship by then. When I climbed down into the hold, Bobby looked at me, pulled on his hood and dragged his hose down into the tanks.

“Sorry I come late,” said Miguel. “The bambino was sick. I take him to the doctor.”

“Is he alright?”

“He is fine. Just the mamma, you know, she need reassurance.”

“You didn’t miss anything anyway.”

“Yes, I hear about the wink.”

We argued about the wink through lunchtime and all the way back down into the hold for the second half of the shift.

“What difference does it make” I said for about the hundredth time. “It’s not like we thought he was really going to back us up.”

“It’s different,” said Bobby, “him not backing us up is one thing. Outright laughing in our face is another.”

“It just makes it worse for him, when we go back to the union with it.”

“No, it don’t,” said Miguel. “It make us look like punks. You can’t let a man laugh at you like that, without doing something about it.”

“Like what?” I said.

“You got to figure that out for yourself,” said Miguel.

“He’s right,” said Sandy. “It’s about dignity.”

“I’m done with this bullshit,” said Bobby. “There was only three of us in there, anyway.”

“There’ll be more,” I said. “We just got to stick with it.”

“This ain’t Lockheed,” said Bobby. “There’s never gonna be a walkout here. You can’t do a walkout with three people. ”

The whole sandblast crew was standing around us now. Jacob and Miguel looked sheepish. “Don’t look at me,” said Pruitt, the other blaster on Bobby’s crew. “I just got here. You guys decide what you’re gonna do, and I’ll go along with it.” Sandy didn’t say anything. He didn’t talk much, but he’d been there when it counted.

Miguel said, “I have one question for you, Fred. Why you become shop steward?”

“So I could... so we could use it to get things going.”

“Why you don’t do that?”

“That’s what I’m trying to do.”

“No, I mean use it... Think about it.”

Miguel and the other blasters started to pull on their hoods. “Fuck it,” I thought. “This ain’t the way it’s supposed to happen.” Before I realized what I was doing, I’d grabbed Bobby by the shoulder and was saying, “Bobby, what would you do if I ordered you not to work?”

I guess I said it louder than I realized – everybody stopped moving.

“You the shop steward, Fred. I ain’t gonna go against what my own shop steward say.”

I could feel my heart pounding. I thought, “Here’s where I blow a year’s work trying to get on permanent.” In my best imitation of a loud confident voice I said, “Okay, I’m shutting this job down. It’s not safe. You don’t go down in that hole until we got a cover-up man. No cover-up man – no work.”

“Right on,” said Bobby.

Big smiles all around. Sandy dropped his hood on the deck and sat down on a stack of planks to roll a cigarette. Miguel joined him.

“You taking a big chance,” said Jacob.

“No shit,” I said.

Almost as soon as the words were out of my mouth, Gonzalo appeared. He seemed to have a sixth sense about trouble. Whenever it popped up, so did he.

“What’s going on here?” he said.

“Shop steward say it ain’t safe,” said Bobby.

“It’s not up to the shop steward,” said Gonzalo. He looked at his watch. “It’s a half hour into the shift. You should all be down the hole blasting by now.”

Fruit sat down next to Miguel. “Spare some tobacco?” he said.

Miguel took out his pouch and handed it to him.

Gonzalo turned to me. “Did you tell them not to work?”

“It ain’t safe,” I said.

“You’d better tell them to get back to work, or you’ll all be in trouble.”

“I can’t tell them to work when it ain’t safe.”

“What about you, Jacob? Are you in on this?”

“Well, I guess I gotta do what my shop steward say.”

“I’m giving you one last chance,” said Gonzalo to me. “Tell them to go back to work – or else.”

“They need a cover-up man. Why don’t you get one from JJ’s crew – they’re just up topside.”

“Alright my friend, now you are in big trouble. Come with me.”

I was in the office for well over an hour with Austin and Gonzalo. They took turns making threats, playing good cop bad cop. Austin mostly played the good cop.

“You don’t understand these guys,” he kept saying. “They’ll take advantage of you. That’s what they’re doing now.”

“You are in big trouble,” Gonzalo kept repeating. It rolled off his tongue as if he really liked the sound of it. “Big trouble.”

“Don’t make me call the superintendent,” said Austin. “It will be out of my hands after that.”

But I’d made my decision back down in the hold. There was nothing for me to do now but ride it out.

Finally Austin said, “Alright, you can wait in the locker room. I have a phone call to make.”

Gonzalo escorted me out of the office. “Now you are really in trouble, my friend. Big, big trouble.”

Austin closed the door behind me. Five minutes later he opened the door and said to Gonzalo, “Get a man off JJ’s crew and put him down in the hold as a cover-up man.”

Gonzalo stared at Austin open-mouthed. So did I. We’d won. I couldn’t believe it.

I had one more big surprise waiting for me when Gonzalo and I climbed back down into the hold with a cover-up man in tow: everybody had gone back to work. Jacob had fired up both his pot and mine, and all the blasters – even Bobby – were back down in the double bottoms working – without a cover-up man.

I was afraid this would ruin everything, but Gonzalo seemed to take the attitude that once the decision was made, it was made. At any rate, by the end of the shift, we still had our cover-up man. When the blasters climbed out of the tanks, the first thing they saw was Jacob, me and our new cover-up man.

“Goddamn,” said Bobby. “You did it.”

“We did it,” I said.

“Yes, my friend,” said Miguel, throwing an arm around me, “we did it. But is you made it happen.”

The atmosphere washing up was like what I imagined after winning a Super Bowl game. We were jubilant.

“It’s gonna be a long, hot summer,” said Bobby.

“Damn right,” everyone said.

“They thought you were going to be in their pocket,” said Miguel.

“Now they know,” said Jacob, “We got a shop steward on swingshift.”

“There’s a new sheriff in town.”

“That’s not the way it is,” I said. “It’s up to you guys. I’m just one person.”

It wasn’t until the next day that I had a chance to take Bobby aside and ask him, “You all went back to work – what happened?”

“You were gone so long,” said Bobby. “Jacob got nervous, so he fired up the pot and Sandy and Pruitt went down. Then Miguel. I couldn’t stay up there all alone... we thought you got fired, Fred.”

“What about next time, Bobby?”

“Like you said – we gotta get organized.”

“Yeah,” I said, “right on, but...”

“And the first thing we gotta do,” said Bobby, “is get rid of Quincy.”

CHAPTER SIX

It seemed like a great beginning. Actually it was closer to the end. Well... the beginning of the end. There was still that uplift of spirit that comes when you stand up to the system – even if it was only a half stand up.

“There’s a new sheriff in town.”

My heart kind of sank when I heard that. But I’d set myself up for it. What good is being a shop steward? Well, it can be a spark. That was the idea anyway. That was the hope. And for a while it looked like it might be a long hot summer. There was a new spirit in the Scalers locker room. It wasn’t just the gap-toothed old leadman who was slamming down the cards yelling, “Might be one!” – we all were. Nobody went down in the hole blasting without a cover-up man. Nobody picked up a scrap of fiberglass or asbestos without taking the time to put on full protection. Nobody took chances with safety just to get a job done.

One night Gonzalo climbed out of a tank he’d been inspecting and yelled at Pruitt, “Hey, Pruitt, run down to the tool shed and pick me up a bale of rags.”

We all thought... “Run – he’s telling us to run?” Besides, Pruitt was a sandblaster, it wasn’t his job to be chasing after rags. Of course, he and Bobby were just sitting around smoking cigarettes while I tried to sort out a problem with the sandblast pot, but still, there’s a right way to talk to somebody, even when you’re the boss – especially when you’re the boss.

Pruit didn't bat an eye. He stood up, tossed his cigarette to the side and said in his long slow as winter molasses accent, "W-e-e-e-l-l-l, I'm going down to the shithouse, but if I find any rags in there, I sure will bring 'em back."

For the next week every time Gonzalo walked past, somebody would call out, "Hey Gonzalo, I've gotta go take a shit. You want me to check and see if there's any rags there?"

There's a tavern on Beacon Hill up at the top of Columbian Way. We'd taken to hanging out there on Wednesdays after work. It had a lot of tables and the music wasn't too loud. Mostly we would just drink and play pool and air hockey, but we spent a fair bit of time talking politics and planning a world takeover, starting with Todd Shipyard and the Scalers Union. Sooner or later, the talk always got back to "The Wink", which had now become legendary.

"We're not gonna get anything done at Todds," Bobby would say, "until we get rid of Quincy."

"The minute I saw that wink," said Sandy, "I knew we was sold out."

"Is about respect," said Miguel.

"Second or third removed... It's up to us to finish the job," said Bobby.

"What does that mean?" I said.

"Is up to us to remove him all the way," said Miguel.

"You got that right," said Bobby.

Nobody from swingshift would go to union meetings after the wink, except for me of course. Arguments between Quincy and Reuben were the main event at most of the meetings. Generally speaking, Reuben wanted to fight and Quincy wanted to lie low and make sure we didn't lose any jurisdiction to the other unions – but that's an oversimplification and a little unfair to Quincy. Reuben was

a genuine militant, ready and willing to use industrial action when called for, but for him the first step in a dispute usually involved going to a tribunal or starting a lawsuit, and Quincy had a point in saying that if we'd gone to law every time Reuben wanted to, the union would be bankrupted.

Quincy preferred the wheeler-dealer approach. He was deathly afraid of us losing jurisdiction to other unions, which would mean loss of Scaler jobs and loss of income for the union, so he was careful not to provoke either the shipyards who might try to give our jurisdiction away, or other unions who might want to take it.

He was even more afraid of provoking the national union that we belonged to, the Laborers International. There was good reason for this fear. The Taft-Hartley labor laws were written up so that the so-called Internationals owned their Locals, lock, stock and barrel. They could confiscate anything that belonged to the Local – property, buildings, bank balances... They'd already done this once to the Scalers. They could also, with very little excuse, decertify the Local and hand over their jurisdiction to any other near-by Local. There was a rumor that they'd threatened to do this if Reuben was ever made business agent, although, according to Reuben, the rumor was started by Quincy.

Reuben was afraid of nothing and no one. That was his great strength and his great weakness. Sometimes, argued Quincy, a little caution is in order if you want to survive out there in the jungle. But wheeling and dealing can only get you so far if you've got nothing to back it up with. The unresolved grievances were piling up into a mountain, and piling up alongside was anger at the way Quincy was doing his job.

I kept the guys on swingshift up to date about what was going on at the meetings, and they were keen to link up with Reuben. There was no hope of

getting him to meet us at the tavern – everyone knew he'd been on the wagon for years – so we set up a meeting at Reuben's house. There were about a dozen of us from Todds swingshift and half a dozen from Lockheed dayshift. There were a few others from the smaller shipyards, including Mack, Tony and Joe.

Bonnie and Clyde didn't come. Neither one of them was working at Todds at the time, but that wasn't the main reason.

"If it comes to a vote," said Clyde. "we'll be there to vote against him. But the Scalpers is mostly a Black union. Quincy is Black. We're white. It's not gonna look too good if a bunch of white people try to throw him out."

We'd spent a lot of time struggling about this inside the Party. It was a serious concern. The Scalpers was very firmly a union open to all workers of every nationality, male and female. But it was also an important institution in the Black community. And there were no Black members in our workteam – or in the rest of the Party in the Seattle area at the time. We had to be careful not to seem like we were going in to "sort things out" and take over.

Actually, this would have been true in any union, even if it were 100% white, but the fact that it was a mostly Black union made the point even stronger. Black people in the United States had their own national history. They had all the attributes of an oppressed nation within the borders of the United States, and as such, had the right to self-determination.

At the same time, the overwhelming majority of Black people were part of the working class, and they tended to be one of the most militant and class conscious sections of it. The Shippers Union was living testimony to this.

As far as getting rid of Quincy, it wasn't really a bunch of white people doing anything. With the exception of me, all the driving forces were Black and

longstanding members of the union. Besides, the real turning point had already happened when we took jobs in the Scalpers and started trying to organize in the first place. Workers of the world unite – isn't that what we believed in?

Reuben started the meeting at his house with a short speech about how the union wasn't going to be able to resolve any of its outstanding grievances as long as Quincy was doing the negotiating for us. There was general agreement with this, although Bobby and a few others had a tendency to put it in stronger terms – until Reuben reminded them that they were in his home and should use appropriate language.

The big question was how to go about getting rid of Quincy – should we wait for the next election or try to impeach him? Our workteam argued we should organize for the next election. But the election was a year away, and nobody else wanted to wait that long for a change. Truth be told, we didn't argue very hard for our position – we were keen for action the same as everyone else.

The impeachment process was pretty straightforward. Anyone could bring charges. The Board of Trustees would hold a hearing and take a vote. If their vote was upheld at a general meeting, Quincy would be out.

We drew up a list of charges against Quincy. Some related to his failure to push grievances in the shipyards. Bobby and I filed some from Todds; Reuben filed some from Lockheed. Other charges were about his violations of the union by-laws. Reuben filed a charge about Quincy hiring his friend to manage the office, rather than bringing in the president of the Local, i.e. Reuben himself. There were other charges of favoritism in handing out jobs to friends and relatives. As best I recall, there were no charges of theft. No one claimed he had actually stolen money.

A month after our meeting at Reuben's, the Board of Trustees convened a hearing to investigate the charges. Quincy was the last one to arrive.

“So, is this the kangaroo court?” he said.

“There's no kangaroo court here,” said Reuben. “This is a legally constituted meeting of the Board of Trustees convened according to the bylaws.”

“All I can see are kangaroos.”

I knew then that the Board vote would be unanimous. Quincy was a smart operator. He wouldn't be calling the Board names if he thought anyone was going to vote for him.

We went through the charges. Quincy refused to answer them. We took a vote. It was unanimous.

“I'm sorry it's come to this,” said Reuben. “I'll take possession of the keys to the office now.”

“Oh, no you won't,” said Quincy. “I don't recognize this kangaroo court.”

“You know perfectly well that it is duly constituted according to the bylaws.”

“And you know perfectly well that its findings aren't valid until they're ratified by a general meeting.”

“You right,” said Reuben. “But you are still responsible to the Board, and we have found you unfit for office.”

“We'll see what the members have to say about that,” said Quincy. “In the meantime, I'm running the office until the members have their say.”

So the stage was set for a big showdown. The next general meeting was three weeks away. Bobby and I spent the time talking it up on swingshift. We tried to reach out to Todds dayshift, but that was a lot slower going. Bobby knew only a few people on dayshift, and I didn't know any. There was a half hour break

between when they got off and when we started, so in the normal course of events, we wouldn't even come into contact with them at shift change.

We started coming in early, but we didn't get very far. Most of the dayshift were old-timers. Even Bobby was a newcomer to them. Mostly they didn't care one way or the other, but there was a surprising undercurrent of mistrust for Reuben. Nobody doubted his courage and integrity, but there were big doubts about his judgment. There were also worries about a "Lockheed takeover" in the union. This totally caught me by surprise, but not Bobby.

"You been riding the hiring hall, going out on jobs all over, but a lot of these guys have been working the same shipyard for years... decades some of them."

Meanwhile, Mack, Tony and Joe were in and out of jobs at the smaller shipyards, but mostly they were out, so they couldn't do much in the way of organizing. Bonnie wasn't working at the time either. Clyde was at Lockheed.

"I think there's gonna be a big turnout at the meeting," he said. "There's a lot of talk about a Todds takeover."

"They're saying the same thing at Todds," I said, "only about a Lockheed takeover."

"That's how Quincy operates. He could be a Chicago ward boss – he knows all the tricks. 'You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours.' That's how things are run here, and Quincy's done scratched a lot of backs in his time."

The day dawned. Our side showed up early, so we could talk things up with anyone who was still undecided, but there was already a good crowd there – a lot of people I'd never seen at a meeting before, although I recognized some from Todds dayshift. There were two cars parked in front of the meeting hall, and the

Todds people were mostly gathered around one car. The other car was mostly Lockheed workers.

Every once in awhile, someone would go into a car trunk and come out with a bottle of Black Velvet. It was just a few that were drinking – it was early Saturday morning, after all – but I'd never seen anything like that at a meeting before.

It turned out there weren't many who were undecided. “You that new kid on swingshift,” one of the Lockheed crowd said to me. He was about Reuben's age, Black, well-dressed, a big guy who didn't seem to quite fit into his clothes. He reached out and shook my hand.

“I been hearing about you,” he said. “You the new shop steward, right?”

“That's me,” I said.

“Nothing personal about this,” he said. “I hear you doing a good job. But you guys at Todds can't be running the whole show.”

“Reuben's from Lockheed,” I said. “He's a shop steward there, isn't he?”

“He a good man. Ain't nobody denying that. But he got a tendency to fly off the handle. And Quincy...” He put his arm around me and bent down to whisper in my ear. “He a little bit of a crook, Quincy is. But them International boys in Chicago, they all big-time crooks. Quincy know how to talk to 'em. Reuben don't. He just get 'em mad.”

The meeting didn't last long. There was only one item of business and everybody already knew how they were going to vote. There were calls for a vote as soon as Reuben banged a gavel to open the meeting. Reuben insisted on reading out all the charges against Quincy, but the discussion that was supposed to come after was cut short.

“Okay, we heard the charges. They're bullshit. Let's vote.” The guy who yelled this was a sandblaster from Todds... from swingshift. I knew we'd lost then. But Reuben was going down fighting.

“Listen, young man, we don't have that kind of talk here in our meeting hall. You can say what you want here, but you have to keep a civil tongue in your head.”

There were murmurs of assent throughout the hall. This was turning out to be the rowdiest Scalers meeting in who knows how long, but the Scalers had a lot of pride in their union and its traditions. Reuben kept the meeting in order, but only just...

“I apologize for using bad language,” said the blaster, “but we ready for a vote now.”

There were calls from all around the hall, “Vote! Vote! Vote!”

“Alright,” said Reuben. “We gonna take this to a vote without any further discussion, since that appear to be the consensus. But this is the most important vote we taken in a long time... a long, long time. I hope you all have given it serious thought.”

The vote was close, but not that close. It was a clear defeat. The Board's findings were overturned. The charges against Quincy were dropped.

5. ANNIE

I was sitting on the deck at the bottom of the ship's hold. I was alone – the ship was empty except for a watchman somewhere on the decks above. We were docked at one of the terminals a few miles from Todd Shipyard. Tomorrow they would start loading containers. I had been charged with the supremely important task of chipping some gunk off the bottom of the deck. A truck had ferried me over to the ship and would be back to pick me up at the end of the shift. It was a plum job – nobody to watch you and twice as much time as you needed to do it. Normally this would go to one of the old-timers, but Todds had made it a practice to give me any job that would take me away from the rest of the crew where I could cause trouble. An unnecessary precaution now – the big fight for control of the union had been lost and everybody was demoralized. Besides, the work was slowing down. Already they had laid off half of swingshift and transferred the survivors to dayshift – a few more weeks and I would be gone.

I was sitting on the deck with my legs splayed out, my ass pressed up against the cold steel. Jacob had warned me about this more than once.

“The ’rhoids’ll get you. You sit on cold steel, by the time you’re my age, the ’rhoids’ll get you.”

Jacob knew everything there was to know about hemorrhoids. I knew more than I wanted to. I sat there, the chipping gun chattering away between my splayed-out legs, and I felt the cold creeping up from the deck, going right through me and settling into the pit of my stomach. It felt like it belonged there.

I was thinking about Annie. God, she was perfect. Beautiful, intelligent, dynamic and right on. She was a leader. She could do that thing that Lenin had described – look at a complex situation and grasp the key link, the contradiction that, once resolved, would move the whole situation forward. I was a leader too, at least, I could figure things out, and I had the passion and maybe even a certain amount of charisma, but I didn’t have the self-confidence – not the way Annie or Gabe did.

Annie and Gabe had been lovers. Now they were broken up. Now Annie and I were lovers. Annie was madly, passionately in love with me, and I was totally lost in the affair, in Annie, in the perfect sexiness of her body and her mind and everything else about her. It had been going on for a month, a nonstop powder keg orgy of sex and revolution. It was perfect in a way that I never dreamed it could ever be again. And sitting there on the deck at the bottom of the ship’s hold, with the cold climbing up through my ass and into the pit of my stomach, I knew it was too perfect. Something had to be wrong. If there was nothing to worry about, I would probably have invented something.

The whole thing had been such a surprise...

I was standing at the back of the room at this anti-war meeting, not very excited because it was just a kind of marking-time meeting – planning another teach-in or a tiny march – and not very involved because it wasn't part of my “central task”. Everybody had a central task. Mine was organizing in the shipyards – or it had been. Now I was hanging out waiting to be laid off. I was at this meeting just to add to the body count. I wasn't even supposed to play an active role in it, because I wasn't on the workteam that had planned it, so I didn't know what their immediate objectives were. I was standing at the back of the meeting, bored as fuck, when Annie walked in.

“You're late,” I half whispered.

“I know. I've been looking for Teddy.”

“You lost him?”

“Yeah, Saul's gonna kill me.”

Saul was down in the Bay Area for six months and Annie was dog sitting.

“How could you possibly lose Teddy? How could you get him to stop humping your leg long enough to lose him?”

“That's just you, Fred. He really likes you.”

“Ha-ha”

“I'm serious.”

“I know that's not true. He only goes for my leg when Gabe's not around.”

“He likes Gabe too. Actually, I think he might be gay – he only likes guys' legs... How's the meeting been going? Have they missed me? I was supposed to chair it.”

“Nothing exciting. No big fights.”

“Cause I think I should go back and look some more.”

“They’re doing fine without you.”

“You don’t feel like keeping me company, do you?”

I think my jaw dropped a couple inches. Of course I felt like keeping her company. Did I ever.

We drove both our cars back to Capitol Hill. She parked hers in front of her apartment and climbed into mine. Then we drove through Interlaken, which was where the beast was last seen, and cruised around there for a couple hours with our heads stuck out the window yelling, “Here, Teddy.”

No luck.

It was close to midnight when we got back to her house. I parked. We talked. We talked for a long time. I had to work the next morning but I was in no hurry to leave. I expected her to jump out and go inside any minute, but she stayed there, sitting right next to me. We talked about Saul and his dog. We talked about Vietnam. We talked about the Party and its politics and its projects. Eventually we got around to my number one question: her and Gabe, were they still together?

“No.”

That was what I wanted to hear. “Why not?”

“I guess he just wanted something different in a relationship than I did.”

Looking back on it now, I see alarm bells should have gone off then. She put it in terms of what he wanted and couldn’t have, not in terms of what she didn’t want, didn’t like about him. I should have realized she wasn’t saying her feelings had changed, but lust is a great fog-inducer.

We sat there talking for hours. The sun was about ready to come up – you could see the false dawn, you could hear the birds chirping – before I got the courage to touch her. I think I just brushed her cheek lightly. She exploded into

my arms. Our lips glued together, we tried to swallow each other. Seconds later we were naked in her bed. I was on top of her, her legs pulled back to her breasts.

“Now I’ve got you where I want you,” I said.

“What are you going to do about it?”

Afterwards, she lay in my arms, her head on my shoulder. I felt like the king of the world.

“I can’t believe it,” I said.

“What?”

“That you’re here, with me.”

“Why not?”

“That you want me.”

“Are you kidding? The great working class organizer...”

“Ha ha.”

“Well, you are. Okay, maybe not so great, but you’re out there, going for it... and you look so cute in those baggy clothes – didn’t your mother ever take you shopping?”

Our first breakfast together, we both nearly fell asleep in the cornflakes. I had to go in to work – they were looking for an excuse to fire me – and Annie had meetings all day that she couldn’t get out of. Revolution first, love second – but it was a close second. From that morning on, we spent every spare second together. Lots of sex, of course, and just touching and laughing all the time. And lots of just talk – I loved talking with her. I was in love again, the first time since Kathleen had broken my heart into a thousand pieces. I knew I would never love again after Kathleen. But at long last after what seemed like forever, I was in love again. And Annie was in love too. She must have been – she told me so over and over.

Things I remember...

We're at a study group together. Me, Gabe, Annie, her sister Claire and half a dozen other activists from the anti-war movement who are interested in the Party. I think we are studying Marx's pamphlet *Wage-Labour and Capital*. Gabe has made a presentation. We are now in the discussion period. I say something stupid, but I say it with great clarity and force. We go around the circle, each person saying what they think about what I just said. One by one, as the momentum builds, the disagreement with what I've said gets more and more articulate. Annie disagrees and explains why very clearly. Then Gabe speaks, definitively trashing what I'd said. It's my turn to reply. I express an opinion that's pretty much the opposite of what I said the first time.

"But Fred," Claire says, "That's not what you said the first time."

"I was wrong."

We all laugh.

After the discussion, Annie and I leave together.

The next day, Annie hears from Claire that Gabe stared at the door after we left and said, "Where are they going?"

We're at a demonstration at the Westlake Mall downtown. It's a Coalition event, so there's a lot of different political groups besides us there – the Trots, the old Communist Party, what's left of the old Seattle Liberation Front. Annie and I are passing out leaflets for a Party event at the Unemployment Office. One of the "Seattle Seven", the unacknowledged leaders of the Seattle Liberation Front, gives a speech. Once again, I'm blown away by how self-confident, poised and

articulate he is. Afterwards, he comes up and starts talking to Annie – well, to both of us actually, but it seems to me that he’s focusing on Annie. I’m thinking about how much cooler he is than me and getting more jealous by the minute.

When he leaves – probably before he’s out of hearing range – she turns to me and says, “What an asshole.”

“Why do you say that?”

“He’s an opportunist.”

“Well, I know that, but what in particular...”

“Did you see how friendly he was?”

“Yeah.” I would have called it more than friendly.

“He’s just trying to stay on everybody’s good side, whatever their politics are.”

I feel the relief wash over me.

Annie has been married once before. She shows me a postcard from her ex-husband where he talks about her peaches and cream smile. I think about peaches and cream after that whenever her name is mentioned.

We’re talking about the Trots – Trotskyites, in this case, the Socialist Workers Party. They’ve just made some slimy move – I forget what, there were so many.

“Do you ever wonder,” Annie says, “what kind of people join the SWP? Where do they find such creeps?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Sometimes I wonder if I could have ended up there, if I’d run into them first.”

“How can you say that, Fred? You’re not an opportunist. You could never be like them.”

I’ve hated the SWP ever since I got really involved in the anti-war movement. They wanted to organize the whole movement around the slogan “Bring Our Boys Home.” I hated the racism of it. What about the Vietnamese who were dying? Weren’t they just as important? What kind of a world do we want to live in – shouldn’t life be just as precious to us whatever color it comes in? Shouldn’t we make that part of the struggle, whatever particular thing we’re fighting about?

But I wonder. What if I had fallen in with the SWP first. What if they’d said, “You’re right, Fred, that’s the kind of world we live in, but right now millions of people are dying in Vietnam. We have to do whatever it takes to stop that. And we can build bigger marches, get more people involved, if for now we just talk about ‘our boys’.

Maybe I would have got sucked in. “Leave your principles at the door and just get the war stopped, then we can think about the rest of the human race.” But Annie has no doubts, not about me and certainly not about herself. She is brimming over with confidence – and energy, and ideas, and everything else that turns me on...

Which brings me back down to where this started, at the bottom of the ship’s hold, sitting on my ass against the cold metal of the deck, one month into mad love, thinking, “There must be something wrong. It can’t be this perfect...”

That night I go straight from the shipyards to Annie’s apartment – the same as every other night for the last month. No meetings tonight. We kiss, we make love, we fix dinner, we eat, we talk, we make love again, we talk into the night...

I'm just about to fall asleep when Annie says, "Fred, I have to talk to you about something."

I'm wide awake.

"Claire took me aside this morning and said I should tell you about Saul, that she didn't think you knew..."

"Knew what? What about Saul?"

"About our relationship."

"What."

"Saul and I have been in a relationship for almost two years – I thought you knew."

"How could I know that?"

"Everybody else does."

"Two years? I thought you'd been with Gabe..."

"I was. When Saul went down to the Bay Area, we agreed that we could sleep with other people, but we just wouldn't fall in love."

"Not fall in love... "

"I wasn't supposed to, but I did."

"So you are in love with me?"

"Of course. I'm crazy about you. I didn't mean to be..."

"So when Saul comes back?"

"Fred, I'm still in love with Saul, too. And we've been together longer. There's more between us. I can't leave him."

Long silence from me. I can't speak. The moon and the stars are crashing around me. Annie is kissing me, I think, but I don't feel a thing.

We stay up the rest of the night. We talk and talk but there's nothing to say, really. She's crazy mad in love with me, but she's in love with Saul more. To say I can't get my head around this would be the understatement of the year. I'm totally, completely, absolutely dumbfounded, stabbed through the heart – and still in love with her, feeling the waves of longing wash through me like a tidal wave. I can't stay. I can't get up and go.

The sun rises. We make love like two demons. We finish and lay there panting. I get up and put on my work clothes. I fall back onto her, pin her to the bed with one last kiss.

“I really loved you,” I say.

Then I walk out the door. I'm halfway to the car when she runs out onto the porch. “Don't go, Fred. Please don't leave me.”

I look back up at her. She is naked with the winter sunlight washing over her. God! I run back up the steps and fold her in my arms.

“I'm not leaving,” I say. “I'm just going to work.”

“You said ‘loved me’. Past tense.”

“It should be. It should be. But I can't just turn it off.”

“Will you come here after work?”

“Yes.”

We kiss again. I get in the car and drive off.

I should have really said goodbye. I think I meant to. No, I'm sure I meant to. But I knew I couldn't. Then she ran out onto the porch. Naked. I was fucked, well and truly. Fucked.

I came back to her apartment after work. Everything was the same as before, only it wasn't. I couldn't get Saul out of my head. I couldn't stop bringing him up. But I could see that every time I did, it was just making things worse. By the time Saul got back – in about a month – she would be glad to see the back of me.

I talked it over with Gabe. Actually, I asked for his advice. How could I have been so stupid? But we were friends, close friends. And nothing had started between Annie and I until after Gabe had split from her.

Gabe laughed the cynical little laugh that he saved for bizarre hippie customs. “They agreed they could sleep with other people, as long as they didn't get involved... Like that's ever gonna happen.”

I remember exactly where we were then – in a car on South Columbian Way, headed towards the I-5. Gabe was driving. I looked out the window, just in case I started to tear up. “I don't know what to do.”

“There's no future in it, Fred. No future.”

The next day I said goodbye to Annie for real. But even then it wasn't really for real – I was hoping she would stop it. I said I had to leave. I had to get out of this situation. It was interfering with my work. Which was true and bullshit at the same time. I wasn't getting much done. I was brooding about this all the time now. Obsessively. Splitting wouldn't help that, though. It would make it worse.

But Annie jumped on the whole idea of how it was interfering with my work. Jumped on it like she'd been waiting for the right excuse. “That's the most important thing,” she said.

Hell, yes. Revolution first. Love second. She hugged me and kissed me and cried real tears and practically pushed me out the door.

That was Thursday. Friday night there was a benefit gig downtown. I think it was for the divorce co-operative that she worked on. A cool band, a cool venue. We had agreed to meet up there. The reason was unclear. It was over and not over. Really, it was over but I was hoping things would turn around. The gig started at 9 p.m. but I had been put back on swingshift for a three-day job. I didn't get off until 11 p.m. I broke speed records to get down to Pioneer Square, but I was too late. The benefit was packed out. The doors had been closed, and they were only letting people in when someone else left. But nobody was leaving.

I went to the front of the line and tried to talk my way in.

"I just got off swingshift. I couldn't get here any sooner."

"That's too bad."

"There's someone waiting inside for me."

"Yeah, me too," said the guy behind me.

Just then I caught sight of Tony Mazola at the edge of the crowd inside. "Hey, Tony. Tony... c'mere."

"Hey, Fred. It's a great gig."

"Terrific... it's probably better if you're inside."

"Oh yeah, sorry. How come you got here so late?"

"Swingshift."

"Oh yeah, I knew that. Sorry."

"I've gotta get a message to Annie. Will you ask her to come out here?"

He eyed the heaving crowd dubiously. "I don't know..."

"She'll be dancing," I said. "Probably right in the middle of everything."

"Okay, I'll try."

Ten minutes later and still no Tony. No Annie either. Then I caught sight of one of her friends, Shannon, who worked on the divorce co-op with her. I flagged Shannon over.

“Shannon, do you think you could get me in? I was working swingshift. I couldn’t get here any sooner.”

“Sorry, Fred, it’s packed out.”

“But it’s your benefit – you’re running the event.”

“It’s our benefit, but we’re not exactly...”

At this point, the guy on the door intervened, “Fire laws, buddy. We can’t pack any more in – and everyone else here has been waiting longer than you.”

I understood the principle. I didn’t want any special favors, really, but how could I explain to them that it wasn’t just about getting inside a cool gig for me, it was about the whole world crashing in on me and my heart breaking in two. Cue the violins.

“Okay, well, Shannon, can you get a message to Annie? Tell her I’m out here.”

“Sure, be glad to,” said Shannon, and disappeared back into the crowd.

A couple minutes, still waiting, I catch site of Tony again.

“Hey Tony... Tony... I thought you were gonna get a message to Annie for me.”

“I did. Hasn’t she been out here?”

“No.”

“Well... the band was really loud. Maybe she didn’t hear right.”

“Tell her again.”

Tony dives back into the crowd. A few minutes later, Annie comes out.

“Fred... I didn’t know you were out here.”

“Didn’t Tony tell you?”

“I thought he said you were here inside. I was kind of looking for you”

“I couldn’t get here until after my shift finished.”

“I know.”

“Is there any way you can get me in?”

“I don’t think so, Fred. It’s a benefit – everybody knows somebody.”

“You wanna come out and talk for a while?”

“I can’t – I’ve got a shift on the literature table. Why don’t you get in line?

The band’s great – it’s worth it.”

“The line’s not moving, Annie. Nobody’s leaving.”

“Oh. Sorry.” An awkward silence. Then Annie said, “Hey, you’ve got your collar caught under your coat again. Don’t you ever look in a mirror?”

She came closer, reached out, put her arms around my neck and pulled the collar out. She smiled. I thought we were going to kiss. But then she stepped back.

She looked at me and kind of half bit her lip.

“Is that a cold sore starting up again?” I ask.

“I know. Ironic, isn’t it?”

Annie had been getting over a cold sore when we started. She said the doctor had told her it wasn’t contagious. We put the doctor’s theory to the test of practice with hours of nonstop kissing. The theory was conclusively proven wrong. At one point our lips had been so blistered over we could hardly touch without wincing.

Now I would always have something to remember Annie by.

“I’ve gotta go, Fred. My shift is starting.”

“Have a good time.”

“Don’t give up – some people are bound to start leaving.”

I waited in line for a while, but the line didn’t move. It was freezing outside. I gave up and went back to my car. I drove around aimlessly. Two or three times, I drove past the gig. The line was getting smaller, but only because people were giving up. It was still the same people at the front waiting to get in. The last time I drove by, the line was gone; the house lights were on inside and people were trickling out.

I parked the car and ran back up to the venue. The crowds were gone. The organizers were packing up. I saw Shannon.

“Where’s Annie?”

“Not sure, Fred. I think she left.”

I raced back up to Capitol Hill, but her house was dark. I checked the parking lot in the back. It was empty. Back to driving around aimlessly. I kept checking her house for lights, checking the parking lot for her car. Finally, hours later it seemed like, I saw a small light in the back of the house. I drove through the alley to the parking lot behind.

Annie’s car was there.

So was Gabe’s.

I couldn’t believe it. I think I just drove through the alley without stopping the first time. But I came back. I had to. I parked the car and got out. The kitchen light was on, but I could see through the window that no one was there. I walked around to the bedroom window. It was dark, but I could hear them inside.

“Is it good?” he was saying.

“G-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-d”

I tried to leave but my legs wouldn't carry me. I collapsed against the side of the house, my head just underneath the window. I kept saying under my breath – I think it was under my breath – no, no, no, no, no, no... Thank god it was winter – the window was closed.

I don't think they could hear me, but I'm not sure. I could hear Annie saying something like, "But don't you kind of feel sorry for him?"

And Gabe was saying, "No, he brings it on himself."

The voices stopped then. I think they were fucking. I imagined that when she said, "G-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-d" he was sliding his cock into her. I don't know how long I was there – not long – not more than a thousand years. I must have got back to the car and driven off somehow. Sooner or later I must have found myself back at my apartment. I must have got to sleep eventually – that day or the next.

Years later I read about this experiment with mice. They raised mice in two different environments. One environment was rich, with lots of toys and lots of other mice to play with. The other mice were raised alone in an empty cage. When they were grown, they would pair off the mice and let them make friends with each other. Then, once they had bonded, they would separate them. The first group, the rich mice, would make a quick recovery. Pretty soon they would be exploring the cage, making friends with other mice, checking out the toys... but the second group, the poor mice, would go through what the researchers called an extended grieving process. They would just huddle in the corner and shake uncontrollably – for a long, long time.

When I read about this, I knew I was kindred spirits with the second group of mice. After I broke up with Kathleen, it took me two years to recover. The first month, I couldn't eat or sleep or even stop crying. I would wake up in the middle

of the night crying. It wasn't so bad with Annie. It would still take about two years to get completely over it, but at least I could control the crying – I only did it when I was alone. I tried not to be alone as much as possible.

The next time I saw Gabe, I confronted him about what I saw as his betrayal. It was after a meeting at his place. I waited until everybody else was leaving.

“Could I have a word with you in private.”

We went into the kitchen. I closed the door behind us. I was trembling. Confronting Gabe with a serious criticism of any sort would be intimidating, but this was a whole different order.

“I think you were really unprincipled.”

“How is that?” he said.

“You should have told me you were still interested in Annie.”

“You didn't ask. I don't have to tell you my private life.”

“I asked you for advice as a friend. You should have declared an interest.”

“You asked me a question. I gave you an honest answer.”

“You said I should break up, that there was no future with her. Then you got back with her as soon as I did.”

“I didn't tell you to break up. I said there was no future to it. It was your choice what to do. Just like it was my choice what to do.”

End of story, as far as Gabe was concerned. It seemed so clear to me, but Gabe wouldn't give an inch. If he had apologized, admitted he'd been in the wrong, it wouldn't have made me hurt any less, but it would have made it easier to... trust him? Work with him? Go on living inside the Party?

The next time I saw Gabe was at the Regional Central Committee meeting. He was proposing plans to build for the coming May Day event.

May First, International Worker's Day, along with International Women's Day, March 8, were the two most important days in the Communist calendar. They were a time to link up all the diverse struggles we were involved in with struggles going on in the rest of the world, and to lay out explicitly the connection between world revolution and human liberation.

When Gabe listed the proposed workteam members for the event, I wasn't on the list. This didn't make sense. The shipyards were one of our most important areas of work. I was the leading comrade in this area, and what was more important, I was the only one still working there.

"Gabe, why aren't I on the workteam?"

"You know why."

"No, I don't."

"Annie is on it. You said you couldn't work with her."

"I never said anything of the sort."

"She says you did."

"When we broke up, I said my relationship with her was interfering with my work. That doesn't mean I can't work with her."

"We don't want to take any chances, Fred. This is too important."

"It's not taking a chance. I'm upset about the breakup. And I think you were unprincipled – I've told you that. But I wouldn't let that interfere with the work."

"Look at you, Fred. You're shaking now. You're obviously upset. We can't deal with that on the workteam. This is too important."

The rest of the CC agreed with Gabe that I shouldn't be on the workteam – except for Charity. He and Gabe had fallen out over something. I never did find out what. But Charity was only one vote.

A month later, Saul came back from the Bay Area. Annie stayed with Gabe. She stayed with Gabe for another three weeks. Then she woke up one morning, and decided she had made a mistake. She moved in with Saul. She stayed with him for about a month. Then went back to Gabe, this time, more or less for good.

I remember talking to Saul at the end of all this. I'd always felt an affinity with him, even though we were from such different backgrounds – him, ultra-intellectual East Coast Jew and me, a Pasco hillbilly – but I'd avoided him since he returned from the Bay Area. Then one day I found myself knocking at his door.

“I didn't know about you and Annie,” I told him.

“I know,” he said. “There's no reason you should have.”

We talked aimlessly for a while, then Saul said, “I think I know why you're here, Fred. You want to know if your relationship with Annie was real. It was. We talked about it when she came back to live with me. You were important to her, Fred.”

But that wasn't why I was there. Nothing so articulate. I was still torn up about her. I couldn't help looking for ways to be close to her – even talking to her ex-lovers.

Gabe and Annie stayed together for a long time – until long after I'd left the Party, which was years later. Annie was a strong person, with real leadership potential. She was soon promoted to the Central Committee, as I knew she would be, so I saw her all the time – her and Gabe. If it were just a matter of personal connections, I would have disappeared from their lives as soon as possible, but we were all in the Party together. Personal relationships were important, but revolution was more important.

We continued to be friends, Gabe, Annie, Saul and I, but it wasn't the same. I was never as close to Gabe. I never trusted him in the same way. And he lost respect for me. I can't remember whether he told me this, or I heard it from someone else on the Central Committee. I'd shown weakness, as he saw it, in being so subjective about the whole thing. Revolution was more important.

Years later – decades, actually – I ran into an old comrade from those days. She'd dropped out fairly early on – after the first couple years – but she'd been in the same collective as Gabe, and we ended up talking about him. We had a laugh about how stiff and awkward he was, and how harsh he could be sometimes.

Then she said, "You know, for all that, I still liked Gabe a lot, because he had a real love for the people."

It was true. He did.

6. THE PAPERBOY

About the time things were winding down in the shipyards, the Party bookstore got this brilliant idea for a series of lectures. Seattle has a rich history of class struggle going back to the General Strike of 1919 and even before that to the early days of the Industrial Workers of the World (the Wobblies) and the Red Socialists. The great Wobbly songwriter, Joe Hill, wrote many of his songs for singing on the streets of Seattle. They were a way of competing with the Salvation Army bands: singing revolutionary words to go with the Sally Army music.

A lot of the people who played an active role in these struggles were still alive – but a lot of them wouldn't be for much longer. So the bookstore started tracking down some of them and asking them to come in and talk about their lives, the struggles they'd been in and the lessons they'd learned.

The guy who made the biggest impression on me was George McCarthy. He had been a union organizer in the timber industry in the Cascade Mountains in the Thirties and Forties, back when it was a dangerous thing to be. We thought he would talk about his union organizing, but he didn't. He said he wanted to tell us

about his experience as a paperboy in Everett, Washington back during the time of the Everett Massacre.

George's story:

I was born and grew up in Everett, Washington, a timber mill town just north of Seattle. We were a large family with a lot of mouths to feed, so as soon as us kids were old enough, we were expected to take on jobs after school. Mine was selling newspapers.

In 1916, the timber mills of Everett had been on strike for fifteen months. The Wobblies organized a rally in downtown Everett in support of the strike, and they hired two steamers to bring supporters up from Seattle. The Everett sheriff and his deputies – thugs hired to break the strike – were waiting on the Everett dock with guns. When the first steamer tried to dock, they opened fire. Around twelve men on the ship were killed. The exact number is not known because some of the bodies fell into the sea and were never recovered.

Two of my uncles were on board that steamer. Both of them were killed.

I was eleven years old at the time, and the street where I sold newspapers was just around the corner from the bank that owned most of the timber mills in the city. The bank was a partnership owned by two men. Both of them bought a newspaper from me every morning.

One of them was straight out of a Dickens novel. He could have been the real-life model for Scrooge. He was a mean, crabby man who never had a good word to say about anybody. I actually had to count my change every time he bought a paper, because sometimes he would try to short me. The amount couldn't have meant anything to him – I think he must have done it just to keep in practice.

The other banker was a nice guy, a genuinely nice guy. He not only remembered my name, he knew how many brothers and sisters I had, their names, how old they were, and what my father did for a living. He was a busy man, but from time to time he would stop and have a few words with me, ask me about my family, ask me what I wanted to do when I grew up. He was the kind of guy you looked forward to seeing every day.

The two bankers couldn't have been more opposite – one, mean and crabby, the other, kind and considerate. But both of them paid for the thugs and gave the orders that caused my two uncles to be murdered.

I learned a lesson from this that I never forgot. Politics isn't a matter of personality. It doesn't matter how nice you are or how mean you are in everyday life. Politics is about class. You have a choice – just because you're born into one class doesn't mean you can't be a traitor and cross over to the other side. That's true whichever side you start out on. But the side you finally choose counts on a whole different level than whether you're nice to the paperboy on the corner.

7. STRIKE

The Plot:

We finally achieve our heart's desire and lead thousands of workers in a strike. It lasts six weeks. We walk the picket lines with a few gung ho workers while everybody else goes on a much desired summer holiday. Nobody works except the supervisors – and they're not supposed to strike because they're not in the union. Nobody else crosses the picket line. Nobody even tries.

Six weeks later, the company and the union negotiators come up with a new offer. They take five cents off the hourly wage and add one percent to the pension fund, which comes to an increase of just about nothing. The bills are piling up and all that vacation time is starting to drag, so the workers vote to go back to work – by about the same margin as they had voted to strike six weeks before.

The moral of the story: don't teach your grandmother to suck eggs.

The Workteam:

Peabody.

He'd done a stretch in prison for grand theft auto – he'd stolen a Trans Am and raced it up the coast, headed for Canada. He beat the cops chasing him – but there were more waiting at the border.

He did a lot of reading in prison, and it turned his world upside down. When he got out, he joined the Weather Underground. Then he quit them and joined the Party. He was well read, maybe the best of any of us – he'd had all those years in prison with absolutely nothing else to do. He knew the Weather program was bullshit, a hodge-podge of conflicting ideas from Mao to Ché to Huey to Bakunin, so he had no real excuse for having joined them in the first place. He had even less excuse for quitting the Party after the strike and joining them again.

Peabody had a wife and two young children. His wife was smart and knew what was what, but she was totally into being a housewife and nothing more. This made the rest of us uneasy and we tried various schemes to get her involved, but they both brushed them aside with indifference.

I liked Peabody. He hated going in to work as much as I did. We tried various schemes to get time off sick. He told me he'd learned in prison that if you rubbed soap into your armpits, it would raise your temperature. We both tried that one. It didn't work. I tried staring at a welding arc for five minutes without blinking. I knew it would give me flash burns. I thought that would get me at least a day off. I woke up at three in the morning with my eyes on fire. The pain was excruciating, like someone had poured battery acid on them. I writhed in agony for about three hours, but then, just as the sun was coming up, the pain went away, and I was good to go... Well, I was wrung out like a wet rag, but I had no symptoms to show the factory nurse. Peabody laughed and laughed when I told

him about it, but I knew he'd have tried the same thing, only there wasn't any welding in his department.

Lucky.

Everybody liked Lucky. He'd grown up in the Mission District of San Francisco back when there was nothing remotely fashionable about it. He talked about his mother a lot – not in a creepy way, he just loved her a lot and respected all the sacrifices she'd made for him and his brother. Their father had deserted the family when he and his brother were infants, and their mother had worked twelve hours a day as a cleaner to support them.

It was Lucky who taught me the basic principle of street fighting. On Lucky's first day of school, his brother, who was a year older, made up his lunch for him, and when he gave it to him he said, "Lucky, this is your lunch, nobody else's. There's no more where that came from. If anybody else tries to take your lunch, you fight them. Kick them in the knee, bite off an ear, stab them in the eye with your pencil – whatever you have to do – but don't let anybody take your lunch."

"And that's the basic principle," Lucky told me. "You fight. You do whatever you gotta do to win. I mean I'm not much of a fighter..." he said. That was easy to believe. Lucky was scrawny and awkward and kind of goofy looking. "When I get in a fight, I just kind of flail away with my fists. I got no technique, but I go for it. I hit them as hard and as often as I can. That's the thing. Most people are afraid to hit."

I knew what he meant. It's this feeling in your bones, like "If I hit them back, then they'll get mad and really hurt me." But of course they're already trying to hurt you, and the only way to stop them is to hurt them back worse.

Lucky had one quirk in his way of thinking – at least compared to the way the rest of the Party thought. He just couldn't go along with the idea that people should be free to divorce. He saw the logic of it, especially for women who were in an abusive relationship, but he couldn't shake the feeling that in practice, it would just make it easier for men to desert their families.

Nelsen.

Nelsen was almost the mirror opposite of Lucky. Nelsen went to all the best schools, and then on to Columbia where he got good grades, but not too good. That was the formula, he told us, if you were training up to be a member of the ruling class. Good grades, but not too good – and team sports, that was important. No fencing or chess or track and field. Football was the best, but baseball or even basketball was okay – anything where you could show your ability for teamwork and leadership.

Of course, the most important thing was to be born right. You had to pick your parents carefully. Nelsen was good-looking, athletic, reasonably intelligent and came from the right kind of family – almost – but not quite, not quite ruling class. His dad was a personal architect for the Rockefellers, the Mellons, the DuPonts, etc. He didn't design their factories or their offices. But if they wanted a new summer home by the ocean, they came to Nelsen's dad.

It was a personal and social as well as a professional relationship, so Nelsen grew up in the right circles. But he could tell the difference. They were familiar with his father in the same way as they would have been with a family servant. Nelsen grew to despise his father's weakness, and promised himself that he would

never be the servant of the rich and powerful – he would become one of them. And he was on track to doing this – or so he told us – when Jackie happened.

Like her namesake, Jacqueline Bouvier who became Jacqueline Kennedy, Jackie was from old money, so old in fact that there wasn't any left. But she went to the best schools and mixed in the right circles. By the time she met Nelsen, though, she was mixing in the wrong circles. She was mixing marijuana, cocaine and vodka martinis.

Pretty soon Nelsen was going in to the bank where he worked sporting long hair, a beard, a moustache and dilated pupils. Jackie also turned him on to radical politics. They became active supporters of the New Haven 21, a group of high-ranking members of the Black Panther Party who had been framed for murder by the FBI and the local constabulary.

Radical politics cured Nelsen and Jackie of drugs and alcohol. At least it cured Nelsen – Jackie still had a weakness for alcohol. Nothing cured them of radical politics. They read Marx, Lenin and Mao – especially Mao – and tried to live by the ideals they found in his Little Red Book. They got married and moved to Seattle to get as far away from their families as possible. They moved into a working class neighborhood and linked up with the Party.

By then they had three children. I got to know their kids really well because I spent a lot of time babysitting them. It was Party policy to share out the childcare so that parents, especially mothers, could be equally active in political work. Huey, Dewey and Louie – their nicknames, not their real names – were pretty wonderful kids. They were smart and street-wise and loving and generous. As they reached school age, Nelsen and Jackie enrolled them in the neighborhood schools. Nothing impressed me about their commitment more than this. I'd gone

to a working-class school and I knew the real disadvantages in the quality of education there. Nelsen and Jackie figured the advantage in values and not being cut off from the masses made it worth it. The grandparents were horrified.

That was the core of our workteam. A few others drifted in and out, depending on the job situation, but the four of us – Peabody, Lucky, Nelsen and I – were at Paccar for over four years.

The Story:

I was the first one to get a job at Paccar – in the Renton plant. It was a bit like going home for me. Half my mom's side of the family had worked there at one time or another.

My grandpa had started in the Thirties, sweeping the floor in the forge. By the time of WWII, he'd worked his way up to be supervisor there. He built a house on top of Renton Hill, overlooking Paccar. During the war, Paccar worked 24 hours a day producing tanks. In the quiet of the night, you could just hear the faint thud of the forge's drop hammer in the distance. Grandma used to tell us how she'd wake up in the middle of the night to find Grandpa getting dressed.

“Something's wrong with the hammer,” he would say.

It always sounded fine to her, but she would get up and make him sandwiches and coffee, and by the time he was sitting in the kitchen drinking coffee, the phone would ring and the night shift foreman would be asking him to come down and get the hammer sorted.

I'd worked in the forge back when I got out of the Navy a couple years earlier. By then my grandpa had retired and – three years later – died. Up until the day he died, they were still calling him to sort out problems in the forge. The new

supervisor had been handpicked and trained up by Grandpa, and he gave me a job on one condition: I had to agree to quit and go back to college in six months when the fall term started.

“Your grandfather’d turn over in his grave if he thought you were going to spend the rest of your life working here.”

He’d probably be dancing the Twist if he’d known I was going to come back and spend four years trying to organize the workers for revolution. At least I was going to work in the foundry this time instead of the forge. Maybe that would give him a little peace.

The main difference between a forge and a foundry is heat. In a forge, the metal is heated up to the point where it can be pounded into shape. In a foundry, it’s heated to the point where it melts. Then the liquid is poured into molds.

At Paccar, the foundry was divided into two separate sections. The casting room was what you might call the foundry proper. There, they built wooden models of the equipment to be produced. The models would be used to make hollowed-out sand molds into which the molten metal would be poured. After the metal cooled, the molds would be broken off, and the casting would be moved to the other half of the foundry for “cleaning”.

In the cleaning room, the casting would be sandblasted first. Then the metal “risers”, where the molten metal had been poured in, would be cut off with arc welders and cutting torches. Spot welders would fill in any holes in the molds. Then the chippers and grinders would chip away the rough edges and grind the whole thing down smooth.

The casting room was capital intensive – lots of equipment – and the relatively few workers were highly skilled. They were better paid, and the

working conditions were considerably better than in the cleaning room, which was just a bunch of guys with torches, chipping guns and grinders. That's where I went to work. I worked as a chipper/grinder – the bottom of the pile.

It was hot, dirty and noisy. You had to wear a leather apron, leather gloves and safety goggles. If you were smart, you wore a face mask to filter out the metal dust, and ear protection too, either headphones or at least the plastic earplugs they provided free of charge. I wore it all, including both kinds of ear protection. I had too many half-deaf relatives who used to work at Paccar to take any chances.

The shop steward in the cleaning room was a young guy, about my age. He'd started working at the foundry straight out of high school. Everybody called him D'Artagnan because he had a moustache, a Van Dyke beard and long curly hair. He looked more like a musketeer than most of the actors in the movies did.

After I'd been there about six months, I ended up being the number two shop steward, just because no one else wanted it. We had a meeting with the foreman who was in charge of our end of the foundry. The main issue was that we wanted a coffee break in the morning, just like the other section had. The foreman told us to fuck off – only of course in slightly more polite words. He said we could stop and drink some coffee out of our Thermos and no one would complain, which was true, but without a fixed time, most of the crew were afraid to do it. We persisted. The foreman got mad and started shouting at us. I shouted back. The meeting ended unpleasantly.

D'Artagnan was appalled. "You yelled at the foreman."

"He was yelling at us."

"Yeah, but still..."

I was kind of appalled too. Did he think we should just sit there and take it? As it turned out, no, he didn't. D'Artagnan just had a different way of dealing with things. He reported back from the meeting that the foreman had absolutely refused to let us have a regularly scheduled break, but that he did say it was okay to drink some coffee and that it was up to us when we wanted to drink. Then he mentioned that he would be drinking some coffee around 10 a.m. the next day.

When I talked about the next day like it was going to be some kind of a sit-down strike, he said, "I don't know what you're on about, Fred. I'm just gonna have a cup of coffee about the same time I usually do."

But I guess that was the right approach. It kind of defused the situation, made it seem less threatening. Nobody was striking or anything like that – they were just having a cup of coffee like the foreman said they could. The next morning, the whole cleaning room stopped for a coffee at 10a.m. The foreman was apoplectic.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he said to D'Artagnan.

"Just having a cup of coffee," said D'Artagnan. Then he opened his lunch box. "And a sandwich."

So now we had a morning coffee break, just like the other end of the foundry. We still didn't have an afternoon coffee break like they did – and we never would.

The other end of the foundry was a whole different world. It was even physically separated from us by a mountain of machinery: furnaces, conveyor belts, cranes and a giant ventilation system. Because the pay and working conditions were so much better, the turnover was quite a bit lower. A lot of the guys working there were old-timers. Some of them – most of those who attended union meetings – went back to the days of militant trade unionism in the Thirties

and Forties. They were looking at retirement in a couple years, so they weren't too keen on manning the barricades, but they were thrilled to see the beginning of what they hoped would be a new wave of militancy.

The three old-timers who never missed a meeting were Ron, Harry and Lem.

Ron was the president of the union Local. He wasn't exactly a militant, although he'd been around back then and had always been "down for it" when a fight was on. He had two main talents. The first was that he was likeable.

Everybody liked Ron. Even the bosses liked him – but not too much, not enough to make him a company man.

Ron's other main talent was drinking. I have never seen anybody put down so much alcohol on a daily basis and still manage to function. He never missed a day of work. He never appeared drunk, although everybody knew his Thermos – his extra-large, jumbo-sized Thermos – was full of Jack Daniels, not tea. Once, we all stopped off at his house after a union meeting, and in the center of his kitchen table was the largest bottle of whiskey I'd ever seen. Five gallons at least, maybe ten. It was on a swivel in a giant metal frame, so you could just tip it over to pour your drinks.

Harry was the shop steward. He had enormous respect on the shop floor. He'd been a real fighter in his time, and he wasn't afraid to mix it up still, if the occasion called for it. The first time I was fired on a trumped-up charge, he went into the office and chewed the supervisor's head off – politely, and in a quiet voice, citing all the rules and regulations that had been violated and how much trouble it would cause if my firing stuck.

The second time I was fired, it wasn't a trumped-up charge. I'd done something stupid and juvenile. There'd been a notice on the bulletin board – I

don't even remember what it was now, something odious, no doubt – and I decided to show my contempt for it by spitting on it, a big gob of dark... you get the idea. A dumb thing to do, particularly dumb to not look around first and notice that the foreman was standing directly behind me. Fired again – this time with cause.

Harry had a completely different strategy for this occasion. Basically, he laid his heart out on the table and said to the supervisor, “If you fire this boy, you’ll break my poor old heart right in two.”

It worked. They wanted to fire me so bad, but they didn't, just because Harry begged them not to. I couldn't believe it – but I should have. It would have told me something basic about the situation there – that it was in equilibrium. The work was hard and dirty and unhealthy in the long run, but it was steady and the pay level was relatively high. Nobody wanted a revolution, at least not the workers in the casting room. They just wanted to push back a little.

Lem was the exception to this. He befriended me at the first union meeting I attended. Well, everybody was friendly, but Lem kind of latched onto me. He followed me out to the parking lot after the meeting and talked my ear off about the old days for about three hours. Lem was a non-stop talker. But it was good talk, full of ideas and passion for *the cause*. He raged on about the foundry, Vietnam, Nixon, Malcolm X, Harry Bridges, the strikes in Poland... He could listen too. He had a great curiosity about me and the Party and everything connected with it. He asked a lot of questions and was clearly interested in the answers – but talking was his default mode.

By then, Shannon and I were living together. Once, when we were having dinner with Lem and his wife, Carol, at their home, we bet him a fiver that he

couldn't be silent for a full five minutes. He won the bet, but by the time the five minutes were up, his face had turned purple and we could see smoke coming out his ears.

Lem's wife was quiet – she had to be – but it was clear that in most things she ran the show. When we were leaving that night, she took Shannon aside and said, “Lem really likes Fred. He's seemed years younger ever since Fred first showed up at a union meeting.”

“Fred's had quite a lot to say about Lem to me, too.”

“You guys remind me of us, when we were your age. We thought we could change the world.”

“You did,” said Shannon.

“Well... change it some more.”

“Change it with us.”

“No, it's your turn now.”

Shannon and I didn't see it that way. We were trying to get everybody involved, young and old. Not just involved, we wanted them to come in and drive things forward – not just get involved, take over.

There was a phrase we kept repeating in all of our meetings, “Unleash the creativity and initiative of the masses.” That's what we were trying to do. Mao said, “A single spark can start a prairie fire.” We wanted to be that spark.

The next two members of our workteam to get jobs at Paccar were Nelsen and Lucky. They got hired at the Seattle plant, Kenworth trucks. Nelsen was particularly good at getting to know people there on a social level. He had an outgoing personality – and maybe his training for the ruling class helped – but the

main thing was that he was a family man. It never occurred to me, until I saw it, what a huge difference this would make, but of course children, besides being the joy of the proletariat (as Stalin said), are the most amazing social glue. They make friends long before parents do. They have sleepovers, enthusiasms, long telephone conversations, if you let them... Aside from all that, they represent this thing that all parents – all loving parents anyway – have in common: obligation, duty, a kind of willing slavery.

When I was working in the Shipscalers, I always had a sense of separation that I ascribed to race and class. Now I could see there was another thing too. Most guys that were working steady for any length of time had children, and this meant they were in a slightly different world from mine. Nelsen was in their world. It put him in line for a range of social connections that were cut off from me.

Nelsen and Lucky made a lot of friends in the sheet metal shop where they worked. Probably the most important one was the Prez, called that partly because he was so into Lester Young, the great tenor saxman who had the same nickname, but mainly because he was sort of “in charge” there in the shop. He wasn’t the shop steward, but if there was a problem, it was to him that people would come. If there was a new TV show that was causing a lot of talk, everybody wanted to know what the Prez thought of it. If there was an argument, he would settle it.

I remember a barbecue I went to at the Prez’s. There were about a dozen guys from work there, along with their families. Lucky and Nelsen were there, of course, and Nelsen’s wife, Jackie, and their kids. There were well over a dozen kids altogether, running around causing mayhem, while the women got the food ready, and the men did important things to the fire. Soon, the smell of burning

flesh filled the air. Then, the feast. The kids stopped running long enough to wolf down a hamburger or two, and the rest of us sat around talking, covering a range of topics from school lunches, to politics, to jobs.

Eventually the talk settled into a discussion of the latest plot by Kenworth management to squeeze a bit more work out of the sheet metal shop, and the barbecue turned into a shop floor conspiracy for a while. Everybody had an opinion about what should be done, husbands, wives... there was even an occasional comment from some of the older kids. The Prez would sit back and let everybody talk. Then, when he spoke, he would pick up on the best ideas and knit them into a plan. It was fascinating to watch, because it was so much like the style that Gabe had in our political meetings. And as with Gabe, once he spoke, there was a reluctance to contradict him – with one exception, Queenie.

Queenie was the Prez's wife. I don't know if that was her real name, but I never heard her called anything else. Queenie and the Prez were both fighters, but where the Prez was down to earth and practical with it, Queenie was a bit of a firebrand. When she jokingly suggested firebombing the foreman's office, everybody laughed, but I think she was only half joking.

When the discussion left the shop floor and got back onto politics, Queenie's firebrand side really lit up. A new song called "The Americans" had just hit the charts. It was a pompous rant by some Canadian that was supposed to be about how wonderful Americans were, set over a patriotic melody with a drum beat. Most of it was just a hymn of praise to American foreign policy. Everyone in the Party hated it, of course, because it was a pack of lies set to music. But a lot of guys at work really liked it, because it was also a hymn of praise to all the ideals that were supposed to be guiding that foreign policy, ideals that they believed in...

“Maybe we don’t always do the right thing,” Mickey was saying – he was one of the guys from the shop – “but we always try to. I think we’re a good country. We always try to...”

Queenie cut him off. “Yeah, I used to believe that baloney too.”

“You don’t believe in our country?” said Mickey.

“I don’t even know what that means – “believe in” is something you do to a religion.”

“I’m just talking about patriotism,” said Mickey.

“Yeah, and too many people treat that like a religion,” said Queenie.

“Don’t you think we should love our country?” said Mickey.

Nelsen and Jackie jumped in then, “Why should we care more about workers in Detroit,” said Nelsen, “than workers in Tokyo or Berlin?”

“Aren’t they all people,” said Jackie, “just like us, who work for a living, have families...”

“But it’s not the same,” said someone else. “We’ve got stuff in common, history...”

“History,” said Jackie, “like slavery, like Vietnam...”

“I don’t care,” said Mickey. “No... I do care, but it’s still my country...”

“It’s like this,” said the Prez. “When you love a person or a country, you love them, warts and all. But that doesn’t mean you love the warts.”

The Prez had spoken. People nodded – most people.

“I don’t know,” said Queenie. “I don’t even think it’s one country. I think there’s the country of you and me, Mickey, and of my warts-and-all husband here, and then there’s this other country, the country of the Warts. And you might think they believe in the same things we do, but they don’t. They’re not one of us.”

They're like a completely different species from another planet. We're not even human to them. We're just their pack animals."

We had great hopes for the Prez and Queenie. Our workteam would make a list of all the people we came into contact with through the struggles we were involved in. We'd classify them according to how "advanced" their political ideas were, how active they were and how much of a leadership role they played in their shop or community. We would try to unite with them in the day-to-day struggles and also try to involve them in broader political struggles and Party events.

The Prez and Queenie had very advanced political ideas – especially Queenie – and they were both natural leaders. They read our newspaper, agreed with a lot of it, and they did come to some Party events, but it was always like they were visiting from a more normal life of children, jobs, neighbors... I kept thinking about Lenin's comment that for there to be a truly revolutionary situation, things have to be so bad that people are willing to die to change them. Things weren't that bad – not inside the U.S. – in those jobs – at that time.

Steve and Mary came the closest to working with the Party in a full-scale way. Steve was an apprentice in the machine shop at the Renton plant. We got to know him when Peabody started working at Paccar. Peabody had been a machinist before his stint in prison, so once he joined our workteam and started looking, it was pretty easy for him to get hired. He hit it off with Steve right away.

Steve was from England, born and bred in Liverpool. But his mother was American, so as soon as he was out of school, he decided to come over and see what it was like. He met Mary the first week. They fell in love, got married, and by the time we came into contact with them, they were expecting a baby.

Steve was a working-class guy, but the working class in Liverpool was a lot more class conscious. Socialism wasn't a dirty word there, and the old revisionist Communist Party was still an active presence in the trade union movement, so Steve wasn't freaked out by the idea of communism. He had a real internationalist outlook, which made it hard sometimes for him to relate to the *America-Is-The-Best-Country-In-The-World* mentality, but he did like it here – and he loved Mary.

Mary was one of those people who are just too sweet and kind to be real – except that they are real. She was only a year or two out of Renton High School and didn't know much about the big world outside of Renton, but she had a strong sense of right and wrong, was open to new ideas and was curious about everything. She would never believe anything but the best about people she knew – until the facts forced her to believe otherwise – and sometimes not even then.

Once I dropped by their house the day after they'd seen the movie *Nicholas and Alexandra*, a film about the last Czar and Czarina of Russia that ended with the Bolsheviks executing them and all their children.

“It was so sad, Fred. All their children, even the little girls. I cried and cried.”

“A lot of cruel things happen in a revolution,” I said.

“But you guys would never do anything like that.”

“Mary, the Bolsheviks were people just like us – only maybe a little better. They put their lives on the line trying to make a better world, where peasants and workers didn't live in near starvation, where they weren't sent off to die in wars...”

“But Nicholas and Alexandra weren't really evil. They were just cut off from real people. They never had a chance to be normal.”

Steve said, “Mary thinks Nixon is sincere, too.”

“I do. I don’t agree with... well, with anything he does, but I think he probably thinks he’s doing right.”

Steve just laughed.

“The thing is,” I said, “what difference does that make? Vietnamese people and American soldiers are just as dead no matter what’s inside Nixon’s head. The same thing is true for the Czar and Czarina – it doesn’t matter if they meant well.”

“But I don’t think they should have been killed. It was just revenge – they’d already lost their throne. And what about their children? They were innocent.”

“They weren’t killed for revenge,” said Steve. “There was a civil war going on in Russia. After World War One was over, all the Great Powers invaded Russia to try to overthrow the Bolsheviks. I know, because England sent in troops. One of my great uncles was there.”

“That’s right,” I said. “The White Army was outside the city and if they’d rescued the Czar or any of his heirs, they could have used them as a rallying point to keep the civil war going. Thousands more would have died.”

“Fred,” said Mary, “Could you have pulled the trigger?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t even know if I would have had the courage to be in the Red Army in the first place. It’s a lot safer to be a revolutionary when the bullets aren’t flying.”

“Fred, could you have killed those children?”

“Yes, I think I could have.”

“No, you couldn’t,” said Mary. “I know you better than that.”

That was our crew. Not all of it – there were more workers involved on one level or another, but these were the main players. Together, we fought small

battles on the shop floor. We had long discussions about everything from health and safety laws to communism to women's liberation to the latest Hollywood films. Our workteam passed out leaflets and sold newspapers. Occasionally we were successful in getting workers and their families to come to political events we had organized – an anti-war march, a celebration of International Women's Day... But the successes were few and spread out over four years. Four years! I spent over four years at Paccar, chipping and grinding one and a half winch casings a day, and I remember almost nothing but the endless flow of winch casings.

Our one big success – at least so we thought at the start – was The Strike. We were chomping at the bit to make it happen. As the date for a new contract got near and negotiations loomed, we formed a strike committee and started a newsletter. We wrote articles about shop floor conditions, did research into the cost of living, and as details of the negotiations leaked out, we analyzed how far short it fell of keeping up with the pace of inflation. Lem, the Prez and Steve were the most active in producing the newsletter, but a lot of guys on the shop floor helped us distribute it.

We also carried small articles about what was going on outside the world of Paccar. These articles were a lot more controversial, not just on the shop floor but inside the strike committee. There was general agreement to have information about other strikes, but purely political articles got a lot rougher treatment.

About half-way through the newsletter's existence, the military coup against the Allende government in Chile happened. Allende was a Socialist who had been democratically elected President of Chile. The new government nationalized the U.S.-owned copper mines and began a program of social justice. The U.S.

government freaked out and immediately started working on ways to get him overthrown.

On September 11, 1973, the head of the Chilean armed forces, General Pinochet, with heavy backing from the United States, staged a coup. Thousands were killed. Many more were imprisoned. President Allende died, allegedly as a suicide, but no one believed that. Chile became a fascist state,

Our workteam proposed an article about Chile. We said we should expose the role of the U.S. Government.

“I don't think so,” said the Prez. “I mean it's okay in our shop. People know Nelsen. They know he's a bit of a pinko and they don't care because it's him. But outside the shop, it'd be like waving a red flag.”

“That's kind of the idea,” said Lem. “Who do they think organized their union? I bet it was Communists.”

“Yeah, but that was a long time ago,” said Steve. “I mean people in this country are weird about anything connected with socialism. If we want them to pay attention to what the newspaper has to say, we have to be careful.”

“Well, I have to admit you're right about that,” said Lem. “People can be really stupid in this country.”

We pointed out that most of the people killed in the coup were workers and that one of the first things the Pinochet dictatorship had done was to clamp down on the unions.

“This is a union issue,” said Nelsen.

“But it's more than that,” said Peabody. “What are we fighting for? If we never talk about the kind of world we want to live in, we're never going to get there.”

“All the same,” said the Prez, “people are just going to think we're a bunch of pinkos.”

“What's wrong with that?” said Mary.

The newsletter meeting was happening at Steve and Mary's house, and Mary was never one to just serve the tea and listen to what the men-folk had to say.

“We are a bunch of pinkos as far as I can see. You are, Steve, that's for sure. More red than pink, I would say... I mean, before I met you, I would have been horrified to think I might someday be sitting in a room talking about socialism with a bunch of radicals. But that's because I didn't know much outside of Renton High School. How are people ever gonna change their minds, if they don't get their old ideas challenged?”

“I agree with that,” said the Prez, “the part about challenging old ideas anyway. I just don't think the newsletter is the place to do it.”

In the end, we voted to include the Chile article, but it was a close vote. The four votes of our workteam made the difference. We didn't like to do that – get our own way just because we had a four-vote block – so in the future we were careful about the kinds of issues we brought to the newsletter, probably too careful.

Meanwhile, the strike got closer, and our articles about Paccar got sharper. By the time the negotiations had produced a contract offer that the unions were willing to present to their members for a vote, our newsletter had a full head of steam. We were able to show that the proposed contract amounted to a cut in real wages adjusted for inflation. We also had in-depth reports on the financial condition of Paccar, which at the time was just fine: sales were up; profits were

up; the future looked bright. Workers from every section of Paccar were grabbing armloads of newsletters from us and coming back for more.

We counted the days until the strike vote like little kids waiting for Christmas. The vote itself would be by secret ballot, but first each union would have a meeting, so its negotiating team could present the proposed contract and the members could discuss it. My union was meeting in the Labor Temple in downtown Seattle. It was a big building with several large halls, and there were two other unions meeting there. The Labor Temple was packed out.

We all milled around outside the meeting halls, waiting for the doors to open. I was passing out copies of our newsletter and looking for people I knew. I spotted Lem in an animated conversation with two people I didn't recognize.

"They're from the Boilermakers," Lem told me.

We didn't have anyone in the Boilermakers, even though they were the biggest union involved, so I was curious to know how they would vote.

"Oh, they're voting 'no'," said Lem.

"That's right," said the older of the two. "We don't know hardly anyone that's voting for it."

"No way," said the other. "It's a cut in real wages – and they've been making plenty."

"They've been reading our newsletter," said Lem. "They know what's what."

"It's got a lot of facts in it," said the older one, "but I think it was put out by communists."

"What's wrong with that?" I said.

They both gave me a funny look. Just then the doors to the meeting halls swung open. The two Boilermakers rushed off to their hall. They wanted to get in the front row, they said – they had a lot of questions to ask.

Lem and I ended up towards the back in our meeting, surrounded by most of the rest of those from Paccar. I was surprised at how many other foundry workers there were in the hall. I wondered where they were all from. There must be other foundries I didn't know about. I thought we'd done our homework on all of this, but there was clearly a lot we didn't know, even after more than three years.

The meeting started with Tom – the business agent – running down the main features in the contract and explaining why they were so good. He didn't get very far before he was interrupted by angry questions. Tom stood his ground. In fact, he got more and more pissed off as the meeting went on.

Tom wasn't an old style lefty; he was more of a corporate professional. That's not to say he was in the company's pocket, just that he approached the contract with an eye to what could be gotten through tough negotiations in the conference room – not wild confrontations on the street. Clearly, he thought he'd done a damn good job and was mortally insulted that we didn't think so. The more pissed off he got, the more rowdy the meeting got. We were laughing and jeering at everything he said.

Tom spotted me in the back of the hall, stirring things up. By now he had clearly lost it. He pointed at me and shouted, "You, I see you back there. Why don't you stand up and say what you think, instead of making sneaky little comments on the side."

A gift from the gods.

I stood up and made a fiery speech about how the contract was a sell-out and how it might have been different, if instead of an air-conditioned conference room, they'd done the negotiations sweating in a foundry with sparks flying up their noses. Wild cheers. I felt like Big Bill Haywood facing down the copper mine bosses – except I wasn't packing a six-gun.

The meeting broke up right after that. We went straight on to the secret ballot, and then filed out of the hall. The lobby was already full of Boilermakers who had slapped down the union officials and forced them to hold an almost immediate vote “without all the bullshit”, as one Boilermaker told us. If the rest of the unions had meetings like ours, it looked like we were headed for a strike.

Three days later we found out the result. The contract had been voted down by a two-to-one margin. The strike was on. Now for the real excitement, we thought.

Ha.

The factories were all shut, so we had no contact with most of the workforce. We went to the picket lines, but they were tiny. There was no need for them beyond a token few people to wave picket signs in case anybody drove by. We went through our contact lists and tried to organize rallies at the picket lines. I think the first try we got barely more than thirty people. That was a runaway success compared to our second try. There wasn't a third.

At Paccar, Peabody and I walked picket duty with Steve – and Mary, she came down and walked the line with their new daughter. She said it would be good training for the girl, that it would sink into her bones. Nelsen and Lucky walked picket duty with the Prez over at the Kenworth plant. His wife, Queenie,

with a house full of kids and a part-time job, didn't have time to walk any picket lines, but she did get away for the first rally. She didn't bother after that.

"You guys can waste your time," she said "Nothing's gonna happen here."

She was right. Nothing happened at either picket line for the entire strike – unless you counted the two or three teamsters who drove their trucks up to the picket line, parked them and handed the keys over to a supervisor to drive across the picket line. We gave them shit about that, but they just said, "We don't cross picket lines, but we've got to drive up to it or else they'll fine our union. Taft-Hartley outlaws secondary boycotts... Besides, what the fuck difference does it make? A couple truckloads of steel rods... You think that's gonna break the strike?"

Some strike.

The old-timers from the foundry – even Lem – were nowhere to be seen. They all got it – this wasn't any kind of duel to the death, just a temporary lull between contract votes.

Harry went fishing.

Ron went to Las Vegas. "They got a better quality of Jack Daniels down there," he said.

Lem, at least, stayed in town. When I went by his house to try to talk him into walking the picket line with me, I found him working on his garden in the back yard.

"Look at those tomatoes, Fred. Did you ever see any that looked so sweet?"

"They look great, Lem."

"I'll give you some, when they're ripe. It'll be awhile still. This break came at just the right time – I really needed to put in some work on the garden."

“Do you think the tomatoes could spare you for a few hours while you walked the picket line with me?”

“Oh, the tomatoes wouldn’t mind, but I don’t know about my knees. They don’t like that concrete.”

“We could do the north gate,” I said. “It’s still a dirt parking lot there.”

“Nobody’s going to go through the north gate,” said Lem. “For that matter, nobody’s going to go through the west or the south gate either. Do you know what would happen if you tried to go to work in the foundry?”

“What?”

“Nothing. They’d send you home. They don’t want any trouble. They’re just gonna sit it out, wait ’til we’re bored, and then offer the same contract dressed up a little different. That’s how these things go. They’ll nickel and dime you to death.”

Lem was exactly right.

Six weeks later the unions presented a new contract for a vote. What was new? Just two things. First, the pay increase was reduced by five cents an hour. Second, the employer contribution to the pension fund was increased by one percent. Depending on how high your hourly wage was, this could mean your total package went up by two cents or down by a penny.

“It’ll pass,” said Lem.

He was right about that too – because the really significant change in the contract wasn’t in the content, it was in how it would be voted on. No big meetings this time. A simple postal ballot was all that was required by law, and that was all there would be. We were completely stymied. We had a contact list of barely over a hundred. Thousands would be voting.

The contract was accepted on the second vote by the same margin that rejected it on the first.

8. SHANNON

Sex in the Party. Definitely not as free flowing as the Sixties revolution-rock-throwing-hippie days. It wasn't meant to be. We were soberly working on how to overthrow the government of the United States of America in a violent revolution that would take the form of armed insurrection. Not a lot of room for Swinging Sixties sex and drug parties. Then of course, there was me – perfectionist to the point of perversion about any possible partner and at the same time convinced deep down inside that I had nothing to offer.

After Annie, I went through another long bout of celibacy with a couple of one-night interruptions. The first was Dora. Pretty. World class body of the voluptuous type. Intelligent, but not brilliant. Not the type-A personality that attracted me. We had sex once at the end of a long, not very good party. I slunk away in the middle of the night.

Then there was Erin. A cool person. I liked her a lot and vice versa. Good politics. Her dad had worked on the railroad. So had I, so we had that in common. We almost got it on back when she was in my collective when we were first

starting out in the Party, but we didn't. Then she went on to be chair of a new collective working in the garment industry.

A year or two later, we had sex one night, but it was still too soon after I had broken up with Annie, and it was just a lonely fuck in the middle of the night. Erin said she wanted to get good at it, "it" being fucking. I suppose we should have kept fucking, just to get in lots of practice, but I was still torn up about Annie. Also – this will show how profoundly screwed up I was – there was an image of Erin that I couldn't get out of my head.

Late one night at a summer picnic when we had run out of food, Erin had run a knife through a nearly empty mustard bottle and then licked the mustard off the knife. Yuck. I hated mustard. So, not a match made in heaven, but I liked her a lot, so it was worth a try.

We lay there in the dark, me smoking a cigarette. I couldn't resist asking, "What happened, Erin? I thought we were headed for bed back when you first came into the Party."

"Yeah, I sort of wanted to, but I just couldn't. I was new and you were the collective chair. It would have felt like a power thing."

I got that. Erin was a strong person. It had to be equal with her and it wouldn't have been back then. Now it was too late. There was the mustard jar. More to the point, I couldn't stop talking about Annie.

Erin sympathized with me about Gabe.

"Do you think he was principled about it?" I asked.

"No," she said.

"Do you think I couldn't work with Annie after that without being subjective, without jeopardizing the work?"

“No, I think you would have been fine.”

“So you didn't vote to keep me off the May Day committee?”

“Well, yes I did.”

“Why?”

“Gabe said you had told Annie you couldn't work with her.”

“I never said that.”

“Well, I know that now. But I didn't then, and by the time I'd heard your side of the story, it was too late – the committee had already been set up.”

“I should just put it out of my head and get on with the work, huh?”

“Yeah, nice trick if you can do it.”

“Sorry I keep talking about it.”

“Fred, I'm sick of Gabe's sexual politics. I've told him if he fucks up one more recruitment with his sexual imperialism, I'm gonna...”

“Sexual imperialism...?”

“Yeah, I made up the phrase myself – so far as I know, anyway – I'm kind of proud of it.”

“What recruitment has he fucked up?”

“Marlene was the last straw.”

“Marlene? He fucked Marlene?”

Not sure of all the different emotions I felt then. Jealousy, definitely – Marlene was hot – but I was kind of bewildered too. Annie hadn't been in the Party when she and Gabe first got together, but she was right on and getting closer day by day. Marlene wasn't in the same class, not her politics anyway. I was surprised that Erin thought she was a possible recruit, but even more surprised that

Gabe would be so unprincipled. Sex without political unity – we weren't supposed to go in for that sort of thing.

“It just pisses me off,” said Erin. “We spent months working with Marlene. Then Gabe fucked her and dumped her.”

I remembered Gabe telling us how he had been talking to Marlene and a bunch of her friends one night, telling them that comrades in the Party were focused on revolution, not sex, and how that could mean that some of us went for long periods – months even – without sex. He told us how they were amazed and just couldn't fathom that anything could be more important than sex. We had all smiled knowingly.

I felt like such a chump.

Six months after we'd got it on, Erin was in Portland, sent there to organize a new branch of the Party. I had started working at Paccar. May Day had long since come and gone. Annie had brought her sister into the Party by then – and her sister's housemates as well. They were already having a huge impact on our work. Annie was the most alpha type, the most articulate, the most self-confident, but all four of them were pretty impressive, Shannon especially, who had been friends with Annie since grade school. They all made friends quickly; they were good at sizing up new situations and working independently; they were hard-working and committed.

The Party had just started organizing in the electronics industry in the Seattle area. It was a quickly growing sector of the Seattle economy with large numbers of low-paid workers, most of them women. Annie and the rest all got jobs in electronics, and Annie soon became chair of the collective focused on electronics work. They also continued their ongoing work in the women's movement.

The Party was less specialized back then. We worked in so many overlapping fields that everybody knew everybody. Not good for security – we were trying to get away from it – but it made for a lot better social scene. We still had great parties, and when the music played, dancing would shake the walls. I knew Shannon from a lot of different meetings and demonstrations. We had spent time laughing and talking. She had a great sense of humor – Irish – or so I imagined. She danced the way she laughed – heart and soul.

Back then we didn't dance with partners – the whole room would dance. We imagined we were dancing with the whole world, but special one to one connections were still made. I don't remember the occasion, but I remember the place. It was a pub on 14th and Pike. I knew everyone there, but all night long, I had felt a special connection with Shannon. When the lights came on at the end of the night, we all gathered on the sidewalk outside, arranging rides, talking, not wanting to leave. I reached out and took hold of Shannon's hand.

That was it. That's how we got together. After that it seemed like a steady, logical progression. I went home with her. We spent the night together. We had breakfast in the kitchen next morning with her housemates. That made it official. We were a couple. It was nice. Terrible word to use, I know. It wasn't intense, the way it had been with Annie – and with Kathleen before her. Maybe you could say that I wasn't “in love” with her in the blind, painful way I had been with them. But also, maybe you could say it was the first time I really, truly loved a woman, the first time I was together with someone long enough to get past all the glowing illusions and deal with the real person.

Shannon was as real as they come. I've never thought about it this way until now, but I guess she was about the most principled person I've ever known. She lived her beliefs – always. I did most of the time.

I remember the time I sold a car when I was living with her. It was a nearly new Fiat, the closest I would ever come to actually owning a new car. But it was a lemon. One thing after another kept breaking down. Finally, after I had just got the engine totally rebuilt, I decided to cut my losses. It was a good time to sell a small, foreign car. The first big oil crisis was just starting. Gas prices were climbing. The day the ad appeared in the newspaper, the phone started ringing off the hook as soon as I got back from work. The first call was from an elderly couple who were eager to do a trade. They had an older mid-size Ford, not exactly a gas guzzler, but now that they were retired, they needed something with really low mileage. Ten minutes later they arrived. We cut a deal. I went back into the house to get the papers. By then, Shannon was home.

“We made a deal,” I said. “I’ll get their Ford and a nice wad of cash.”

“How much?” she said.

I told her.

“That's too much,” she said.

“Huh?”

“Did you tell them it was a lemon?”

“I told them I had to have the engine rebuilt.”

“Did you tell them it was a lemon?”

“I told them I'd had to get some other repairs too.”

“Did you tell them it was a lemon?”

“It's a car deal, Shannon. You don't try to talk down the money.”

“Fred, 'Steal not a needle nor a thread from the people.' Remember that? Chairman Mao... you ever heard of him?”

“Yeah, but it's a car deal...”

“I can't believe this, Fred. You're stealing money from a retired couple who are probably just getting by on Social Security.”

“I'm not stealing...”

I wasn't. It was a car deal. I was just doing a good deal. But I knew she was right. I went back outside, told them it was a lemon, and insisted on taking \$300 less for the trade. By the end of the week, it was clear that the rings on the Ford they'd traded me were shot and the engine would have to be rebuilt. They'd loaded it up with motor honey so it wouldn't blow smoke until after the deal was done.

“You happy now, Shannon?”

“Fred, you and I are both working full time. You're making a really good wage at Paccar, and I'm doing okay. Do you honestly think we needed that \$300 more than they did?”

“No, probably not.”

I had to laugh. The old wheeler-dealers had put one over on me, but it was a good story, worth at least \$300.

“You did the right thing,” said Shannon.

She put her arms around me and made me feel like a million dollars... well, \$999,700, at least.

So, sex with Shannon. It was nice. That terrible word again. Less fireworks than with Annie, which was already less than with Katherine. But for a long time, it was just a great pleasure to be with her in every way, to get to know her, body and mind. It was the first time I really got to know a woman's body. I know – I

was twenty-three years old by then – duh? But with everyone before, things had been too mysterious or scary or rushed. Shannon taught me basic anatomy, how to please her, how to put in a diaphragm, and she was curious about me in ways that I really liked. I remember her asking if she could watch me shave. I liked that a lot. It made me feel like my dad.

It was about six months before we moved in together. I was the one who suggested it, but I didn't push it. I remember a conversation with Gabe. We were driving somewhere. We were on the same road, almost the same place where he had told me I should break up with Annie. He asked me how things were going with Shannon.

“We're fine,” I said.

“Good.”

“We might move in together.”

“You might?”

“She's a bit reluctant.”

“I know what you mean,” said Gabe. “So is Annie. She worries about losing her independence.”

“Well, it's the next logical step, if the relationship is going forward,” I said.

“I've put it on the table. Either it'll happen or it won't.”

“Yeah,” said Gabe. “That's about the size of it.”

It felt so false, talking to him like that, like we were both men of the world, cool, at a distance from it all. The fact is, I was still torn up inside about Annie. I knew it was over, completely over and would never start up again, but I still felt the ache of loss.

Shortly after that, Shannon and I were coming back from a meeting at Gabe's house. Annie had been there too. We got to talking about Gabe and Annie. I realized what was in the air, what I needed to say.

“Shannon, it's you I love.”

Shannon reached out and took my hand. “Thank you,” she said. “I needed to hear that.”

It was a true statement. I did love Shannon. But I wasn't over Annie. Hell, I wasn't over Katherine. I guess things have evened out though. Decades later, and I'm still not over Shannon either.

About a month later, we moved in together. We rented a house on Beacon Hill and repainted the inside, top to bottom. I must have been in love with Shannon, I'd never painted a room before in my life. I was into the Zen of cracked plaster and water stains. The house looked fine to me as it was, but Shannon made it clear that if I wanted to live in the same house with her I had to paint my way into it. So I painted.

Shannon threw herself into on-the-job organizing in electronics, as did I at Paccar. But work in the electronics industry followed a different trajectory than in the metal trades. The industry was entirely non-union. On the down side, this meant there was no protection for workers who stood up to the company, but it also meant there was no safety valve for discontent, no union/company procedures to absorb the friction, so if a dispute did break out, it could explode into something really big. As Mao said, a single spark can start a prairie fire.

About this time, a single spark exploded into a prairie fire at the Farah Pants factory in the Southwest. The workers there – mostly Chicana women – walked out in a wildcat strike that went on for a couple years. We spent a lot of time

building support for the strike all over the country, including in Seattle. It concentrated questions of race, sex and class, and the way the Farah workers kept on fighting against such great odds was nothing less than inspiring.

The electronics collective had a lot of success in building support for the Farah strike. They were able to get quite a few workers to come to Party events in support of the strike. But they were unable to get any kind of shop floor struggle going – the stakes were too high, and at least at that point, conditions weren't bad enough to take the risk.

Our work at Paccar was almost the mirror opposite. We had a number of minor successes in shop floor struggles, building up to the huge anti-climax of our industry-wide strike, but we had little success in building support for “outside” struggles and Party events. Shannon thought this was because we didn't push this side of things enough. We argued about this, not in a hostile way; we were comrades after all, and we both wanted the same thing – revolution. But the struggle was intense, and as Shannon moved up in the Party hierarchy, it became a major topic at executive-level meetings.

You could say most of the progress we made in understanding what we were trying to do as Communists came from re-reading Lenin's *What Is to Be Done* and finally “getting it”. Then re-reading it again and finally “getting it” for real this time. Then re-reading it again...

One of the key passages we kept coming back to was this: “The Social-Democrat’s ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but *the tribune of the people*, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects...”

I recognized that we'd been too focused on shop floor issues at the start of our Paccar work, but I argued that we'd learned from our mistakes. We had carried articles in our newsletter about the Farah strike, about the fascist coup in Chile – and we talked about revolution...

“So?” said Shannon. “What does that mean? They sell revolutionary toothpaste.”

Shannon and I were still together when my mother died. Mom kept working right up until a few months before she died. Once a year at the start, and then more often towards the end, she would cross the mountains from Pasco to Seattle and stay in the Virginia Mason hospital for radiation treatments. Shannon would usually come when I visited her, but not always – after all, we were hard core revolutionaries, working night and day for the revolution. I didn't visit her that often – once every time she came, at least, but usually not much more than that. I never knew what to say to her when we were alone. I could hardly tell her about my successes in causing trouble at Paccar, even though she knew that's what I was there for.

But at least I had a steady job. That meant a lot to her – and I had a steady girlfriend. Mom could see that behind all the organizing, Shannon was a down-to-earth, loving person. Maybe we would have kids. I'm sure that's what Mom hoped.

Both Mom and Dad had always said that they would be pleased with whatever I did, as long as I was happy. I knew that Dad secretly hoped I would be President of the United States or the greatest philosopher in history, but Mom just wanted me to have a steady job and a family. At the time Mom died, I was closer to that kind of normal life than I ever would be again.

I was alone with Mom when she died. The rest of the family had spent all night with her. I had just got there. Mom was unconscious and not expected to wake up any time soon, so they went to the cafeteria to get coffee.

Almost as soon as they were gone, Mom woke up, saw me, and said, “Am I dying?”

“Mom, you know you're dying.”

“I mean now. Am I dying now?”

“I don't know, Mom.”

Right then, the nurse came in, saw that Mom was awake and in pain – by then she was always in pain – and gave her a shot before either of us could say anything. I didn't understand the significance of it, but Mom did. She knew it would put her unconscious and that she might never wake up.

“It's not fair,” she said. “I have a right to know...”

It was the last thing she ever said.

After the funeral in Pasco, we brought her body back to Renton and buried her next to Grandma and Grandpa in the Highlands overlooking Paccar. Then Dad and my little brother went back to Pasco to start a new life without Mom.

Shannon told me how relieved she had been that I didn't fall apart during the funeral.

“Why would I fall apart?” I said.

“Some people do.”

By then, things were getting a bit strained between Shannon and me. We had got on so well, when I was on swingshift and she was on days, but when I moved to days too, there was more time to argue. Then she got laid off, and the Party

decided to move her to organizing the unemployed. I think this magnified our political differences. Her work was all about the broad issues now, and workers who had been unemployed for a long time were more disposed to question the system as a whole. At Paccar, we found that most workers were reluctant to jeopardize the possibility of winning on shop floor issues by talking up radical ideas.

I was coming in for more criticism from the Party in general. I recognized the pattern. I'd seen it from the outside – now I was experiencing it from the inside. Criticism/self-criticism was part of the process of the Party. We'd make regular reports on our work and on our own personal development. Criticism could be intense – in fact it usually was – but it was generally pretty loving too. Unity-struggle-unity was the ideal. Starting from a high level of unity, criticism could be a way of working out differences, getting even closer to each other, and making our political work more effective.

But sometimes, the criticism would come too close to the inner person. They couldn't get it, not because it was wrong, but because it went too deep. Everyone in the room would be saying, “You're not dealing honestly with what we're saying. You're not being honest. Can't you see that?”

And the truth was, no, they couldn't see it. Even when they were trying – trying so hard their eyes almost popped out of their head – they just didn't get what we were saying.

That's what I was going through now. I was the chair of the metal trades collective. Before that, I had been in the lead on shipyard work. These were now seen as sterling examples of everything that we had been doing wrong as a

revolutionary Party. I could see that. I could see the mistakes, but I thought it was in the past, that it had been fixed. Nobody else on the exec committee did.

About this time it became irrelevant. The work slowed down and our whole collective was laid off. We were assigned to support different areas of Party work until there was an upturn in the employment picture. Nelsen joined his wife, Jackie, working with Shannon at the unemployment office. Lucky was assigned to work on the newspaper. Peabody was around for a while. Then he just disappeared. The last time I saw him was in the Party book store. I had run into Joe Diablo, who had been in the shipyard collective with me. He had dropped out of the Party long since, but he still worked with us. I made some comment – critical it must have been – that lit his fuse big time.

“I’m not afraid of you any more, Fred,” he yelled. “I’ve been doing Kung Fu for five years now. I can kick your ass any time you want.”

Everyone in the book store froze, staring at us. I just stood there with my mouth open. Joe wasn't afraid of me anymore? When had he been afraid? Why? Before I could think of anything to say – before I could even start thinking – Peabody stepped in, speaking low and quiet, but with an intensity that was kind of scary, even though he was coming in to defend me.

“I’m shocked – shocked – that you would talk to a comrade like that. What in the hell are you thinking of? Don't you know the difference between a class enemy and a friend – and by the way, which one are you?”

Joe apologized. I think he'd surprised himself, as well as everyone else. Peabody said he had to rush off. Joe and I talked for a long time. I apologized to him for being overbearing as a collective chair.

“I didn't realize I'd been a bully. I didn't mean to be anything like that.”

“You weren't, Fred. That's not what I meant – just that sometimes you talked to me like I was a kid...”

He'd been seventeen at the time. I probably had talked to him as if he were a kid. After all, I was an old man of twenty-two by then.

But now I really did feel like an old man, a has-been of not quite thirty. The Party didn't assign me a new area of work. They just had me help out with odds and ends until I could go back into the metal trades. I had a lot of time to read. I got through all of *Capital* by Marx. I was amazed at how easy *Capital* was to read. Marx would lead you step by step into really deep waters, but the process was so gradual that by the time you got there, you could swim through it like a champ.

Finally reading *Capital* was the one bright spot in my life back then. I spent a lot of time trying to write songs too, but that was just depressing. I'd written some good songs years before. But then a group from the Bay Area had come up on tour. They were such good songwriters. It seemed to me their songs had everything – revolution, theory and practice, but wedded into anthems that made you want to sing and shout. I'd tried to write like them, but I couldn't. I tried again now. I still couldn't. Shannon said to me, “What the Party needs now is songs that people can sing along with and use to build up their strength. Why don't you write songs like that?”

Why doesn't the robin sing like a lark?

It was about this time that the Party became “the Party”. I've called it “the Party” all the way through for narrative simplicity, but actually up until this point, we just considered ourselves a Communist organization. There were a lot of different Maoist groups and tendencies that came out of the Sixties, and strictly

speaking, a Maoist Communist Party could only be considered as such once it had united all possible groups around a comprehensive revolutionary program.

For more than half the decade, we had tried to do just that. I think it's fair to say that we hadn't had much success in uniting the other Maoist groups, but we'd reached the point where it was clear that this was never going to happen, and it was time to move on to the next stage.

The period leading up to the actual formation of the Party had been a time of intense discussion about every aspect of the revolutionary movement and the kind of world we wanted to build. Shannon had played a really strong role in all of this, and she now moved on to the next higher level of leadership beyond me. In a meeting we were both at, she said, "It's kind of disorienting. I know it shouldn't be, but people are nicer to me now."

After the meeting she told me, "I was talking about you, Fred."

"I know," I said. "But I don't think it's true."

Nicer to her? My last intimate memory of her was coming home from a party where I'd flirted shamelessly with some new recruit barely out of her teens.

Shannon had asked me to dance.

"I thought you were tired," I said – and went for another drink.

We had sex when we got back to the house. Well... I got on top of her and fucked for a few minutes until I came. Then I rolled off her. I remember the moon was shining in through the window. I looked over at her and could see tears in her eyes.

"Why are you crying?" I said.

She didn't answer.

I felt... exactly the way I should have felt, but I didn't know how to make it better.

Not long after this, Shannon came home from a central committee meeting and whispered to me, "Come outside, Fred..."

We walked down the street without talking. When we were far enough away, she said, "You know about Peabody?"

Of course I did. The asshole had gone back to the Weather Underground or some similar bullshit group. They'd done a few bombs, robbed a bank or two, and then got shot up at a botched bank robbery in Portland. One of them had been killed. Peabody had been wounded – something minor – and then arrested. A week later, when he was being transported back from the hospital to the county jail, the rest of his new collective had ambushed the guards, shot and killed one of them, and made off with Peabody. The cops were real serious about finding them.

"We think you should disappear, Fred.

"What?"

"You're the one in the Party who was the most closely connected with him. We think the pigs will be watching you – and keeping notes on everyone you come into contact with."

"You want me to leave town?"

"No, we don't think that's necessary. Just move out and break off all contact with the Party. We'll get back in touch with you when we think it's safe."

I packed up a few things and was on my way out the door in less than an hour. We kissed goodbye at the door.

"Fred, what should I tell my parents?"

"I don't know," I said. "I guess you should tell them we broke up."

She nodded.

I got in the car and drove off. We were living on the south end of Beacon Hill at the time. I got on the freeway and drove north. I should have kept going until I got somewhere that no one would know me, but I took the exit to Capitol Hill, my old hippie home. I drove through the streets aimlessly for a while. Then I started looking for signs that said, "For Rent." I didn't find any, so I parked the car in a clump of apartment buildings and started going door to door. I found a building with a two bedroom apartment for rent.

"Way out of my budget," I said to the manager. She was a few years older than I, dressed in a mid-length skirt and blouse, very business-like. She seemed a bit suspicious of me – not sure why – I was pretty clean-cut in those days and dressed to look normal. I guess the disguise wasn't working.

"Sorry," she said. "We don't have any one bedrooms going..." She seemed to hesitate for a moment.

"All I need is a room."

"Well, we've got a room in the basement. It's got a sink and a bed, but that's about it. It's too small, really. We haven't rented it in years."

It was perfect. I'd wanted to be a Trappist monk as a teenager. Now I could find out what it was like. I lived there for almost six months. At first, I went out only to buy food or to look for work. I read a lot of books, mostly crime and science fiction, the complete works of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, A.E. Van Vogt, Philip K. Dick. I tried to teach myself jazz guitar.

I stayed off the streets. It wasn't only Party members I had to avoid. Anybody who knew me would ask about the Party – that's who I was. What would I tell

them? I couldn't make up some political disagreement – that would be an attack on the Party.

Almost the only person I talked to more than once was the old lady who lived across the hall from me. She was in the early stages of dementia and didn't remember me from day to day. Once I came back from the store and found her on her back in the garden in front of the apartment building. She had fallen over and couldn't get back up. I helped her to her feet, but it was difficult because she kept pushing me away as if I were trying to attack her.

“It's me – I'm your neighbor. I'm just trying to help,” I kept telling her, pointlessly, since she obviously didn't remember me. I felt like crying.

May 1st was coming up – May Day, International Workers Day. It would be the first time in seven years that I hadn't marched with the Party on that day. I broke my rules and scoured the streets for a poster or a leaflet so I could find out the route of the march. On May 1st, I climbed up to the second story of the Bon Marché parking garage so I could watch them march by on the street below. I scoured the marchers for Shannon, but I couldn't find her.

Towards the end of my exile, I finally got a job working on the railroad. I'd applied for a job as switchman on the Burlington Northern a couple months before. The clerk at the front desk said, “We'd like to hire you. We can see you've got experience working on the switching tracks in Pasco. But the problem is, we've got an equal opportunities order against us, and we can only hire women and minorities.”

“The thing is,” I said, “you've got a class of new-hires training out in the yard now. I talked to one of them on the way up.”

“So?”

“They're all white – only one of them's a woman.”

The clerk was young, white and nervous. She looked around to see if anybody was watching. “Listen, I'm just telling you what I was told to say... I'll put you up at the top of the list if anything comes up. That's all I can do.”

Two months later I got a letter telling me that there was work on a steel gang in the mountains, if I was interested. It would be hard, back-breaking work, and it paid a dollar an hour less than the job I'd applied for. By then I would have just about worked for free.

New train track is laid in two stages. A tie gang clears the way, flattens it, covers it with gravel and then embeds the large creosote-soaked wooden ties. A steel gang follows behind nailing down the rails. It's all done by machinery now – the days of John Henry are long gone – except for repairs: if you're just replacing a few hundred yards of rail, it's not worth dragging out the big machines.

We were doing repairs, so I got to swing the big hammer all day long. It nearly killed me. Until this, I'd never had a job that I wasn't physically up to. It was almost two weeks before I could get through an entire day without collapsing.

The steel gang was working out of Ellensburg on the other side of the Cascade Mountains. That meant we would sleep Monday through Thursday in a railroad car parked in the Ellensburg switching yard. Every morning we would ride in the back of a truck up into the mountains. Most of the crew were college age, working on the railroad during the summer to get tuition, just as I had done almost ten years before. I heard one of them say to another – when they thought I was out of hearing – “God, he must be almost thirty. If I was still doing this at his age, I'd shoot myself.”

That's about the way I felt.

Six weeks into the job, the Party got in touch with me in the way we'd pre-arranged. They reckoned it was safe for me to come back into the fold. I drove south to Beacon Hill and knocked on the door. I had the key, but I figured I should knock. Shannon opened the door, but she didn't let me in.

“Fred. What are you doing here?”

“I'm back. The Party reckons it's safe now.”

“Yeah, but... what are you doing here?”

“What am I... I'm back.”

“But we broke up.”

“What are you talking about?”

“When you left... You said I should tell my parents we broke up.”

“That was just something to tell your parents.”

“I didn't understand it that way...”

“But that's what it was – just a story...”

“Fred, I don't want to go back to the way we were. Do you?”

“Well, no... Not the way we were, Shannon, but...”

“I can't let you in right now. We're having a meeting. Can you come back tomorrow? We can talk... and you can pick up the rest of your stuff.”

9. BILLY

A few months after Shannon and I split up, I left the Party. No big political disagreements, no fights over line – I was just tired and demoralized and wanted to be free. I left on good terms with the Party, but when I left, I cut myself off. I kept working on the railroad until I'd saved up enough money, then I quit my job, bought an IBM Selectric typewriter – the same kind my mother had used – locked myself in a room and wrote twenty pages a day until I finished my first novel.

Science fiction. It was crap. I couldn't stand to reread it even once. Then I wrote the first half of a murder mystery, but I had to give it up because I couldn't figure out who did it. Then, I bought a pound of Acapulco Gold – so it was claimed to be anyway – and systematically smoked my way through it, hoping for inspiration. It didn't come.

Then my Dad died. He'd been out dancing when he had a stroke. The band had been finishing off a set. His partner thought it was over and started back to their table, but the band went into a little half a minute sign-off riff, so Dad took

her hand and said, “Not yet, the music's still playing.” Thirty seconds of jitterbugging, then Dad collapsed. Those were his last words.

It was almost four years to the day since Mom had died. My brother Billy had been ten-years-old then; he was fourteen now. The thing he wanted most – aside from Mom and Dad to be alive – was to finish Junior High School in Pasco with his friends. My big sister Anna was living in Seattle. Our little sister was living in Portland. They both had children of their own. I was free.

I thought it would be easy. It was, in a way. Billy looked up to me a lot. I was the big brother who did cool things. I fought the police, went to jail and played the guitar. Billy had started smoking tobacco and marijuana at age eleven – all the kids in the neighborhood did. Dad had no idea. I had kicked tobacco by then. I had gone from two packs a day to zero. Billy quit smoking cigarettes the day I moved in. If only I hadn't started smoking marijuana again, Billy might have quit that too.. I kept on smoking it in Pasco. So did he. That was my second biggest mistake with Billy.

The biggest mistake was that I didn't love him enough. How do you fix that? I did love him. And I liked him a lot. He was a cool kid, smart and funny and loving. I think I did a good job of taking care of him the year we were in Pasco. I gave him too much freedom at the start, but I fixed that – I figured out that he wanted me to discipline him, that he needed to know I cared enough to do it.

But what he really needed – it's a cliché, I know, but true – was a mother's love. That kind of love anyway. Something deep and unshakeable. A rock that he could stand on, that he knew would always be there.

But I could feel myself pulling away from him, wanting to be free. When I first moved in, I quoted a line from Robert Frost to him, “Home is where, when

you have to go, they have to take you in.” By the end of the year, I was quoting a friend's dad, “The law says we got to take care of you until you're eighteen. Then you're on your own, kid.” My friend's dad was joking. So was I. But not entirely.

At the end of the year, we packed up and moved back to Seattle. We lived in a big collective house with my sister Anna, her son, her boyfriend, and two other single mothers. I thought Anna might give him the kind of love he needed. She came closer than I, but she had her own young son and the active, malignant, hatred of an ex-husband to deal with.

When Billy was eighteen, he moved out. When he was nineteen, I moved to Berlin. When he was twenty, a cocaine dealer that he had shorted caught up with him and beat him nearly to death with a baseball bat. When he got out of the hospital, he disappeared. For over two years we had no idea whether he was dead or alive. He ended up in Hawaii, living in a cave, only coming out at night to steal money for drugs. Narcotics Anonymous saved his life. When he resurfaced, we were his second family; Narcotics Anonymous was his first.

Billy says we shouldn't blame ourselves for what happened to him – it was his responsibility. He says guilt is just a form of self-indulgence. He gets that from Narcotics Anonymous. He didn't get much of that Catholic guilt stuff growing up. My sisters and I were steeped in it.

I once read a book on acting by Uta Hagen. In it, she tells the secret of learning to cry real tears on stage. She says each of us has a secret memory, something that will always bring us to tears when we think of it. She warns that we must keep it secret, or the magic will stop working, but I don't care about that.

My memory is of Billy when he was seventeen. We were living in Seattle with my sister Anna by then. Billy and I had just been arguing. He ran into his

room and slammed the door. We were alone in the house, just the two of us. I knocked on the door. At first he didn't answer. I knocked again.

“Who's there?”

“It's me.”

“Me who?”

“Fred.”

“Fred who?”

I was angry and he was playing silly games. I walked away. The sweet taste of freedom. As I left, I could hear him say in a small voice, “Come in.”

But I kept walking.

He said it again, this time a little louder, “Come in.”

I didn't stop. I walked out of the house. Behind me, I could hear his voice, each time a little louder. “Come in... Come in... Come in...”

10. MAYDAY

Where is the Shah?

Where is the butcher?

Where is the king of kings?

It was a real revolution. Things had gotten so bad that people were willing to die to change them. And they did die. And they did change things. But only for a while. One divides into two. Communists and Islamic fundamentalists fought on the same side to overthrow the Shah and drive out the U.S., but when the first battle was won, a second one began – and this battle was lost, the revolution was defeated.

The first U.S. “hostage crisis” took place in between these two battles. It represented the high point of the first, and the beginning of the second. Islamic militants broke into the U.S. embassy in Iran and took the embassy workers and their Marine guards hostage.

Middle America freaked out. Innocent American Lives were at risk. All over the United States, anti-Iran demonstrations were organized. At the University of Washington in Seattle, over a thousand people came to demonstrate against Iran. Most of the left political groups in Seattle showed up at the demonstration with leaflets and newspapers, but they took a long look at the size of the crowd, gauged its mood, tucked their papers under their coats and slunk away.

Except for the Maoists. Two women from the Party – Shannon and Annie – quietly and unobtrusively climbed up onto the ledge of the Student Union Building which overlooked the demonstration. They had a stack of leaflets and a battery powered bullhorn hidden in their backpacks. Once they got in position, Annie took a handful of leaflets and threw them out into the crowd, while Shannon pulled out the bullhorn and began to speak.

“We support the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Iran. The Iranian people had every right to take over the embassy, and here’s why...”

They told about the Shah’s U.S-trained murder squads, about the CIA engineered *coup d’état* that put the Shah into power. They told the crowd that the U.S. embassy covered twenty-one acres, that it had to be so large because it was the *de facto* government of Iran. As for the “innocent American lives”...

“They’re part of a terrorist organization that’s oppressed and murdered Iranian people for decades, the U.S. government...”

The organizers of the demonstration went berserk, they tried to drown out the two women by cranking up their own sound system, but the Party had invested in a state-of-the-art bullhorn that could just about hold its own in a full scale rock festival. Some of the crowd tried to climb up, grab them by the feet and tumble them to the ground, but Shannon and Annie took turns, one speaking through the

bullhorn while the other kicked the head of anyone who got within grabbing distance. The organizers began to scream over the loudspeaker.

“Nuke Iran!”

And then, “Rape the bitches!”

A few people cheered this, but most of the crowd reacted differently. They had come to hear about innocent American lives, not this kind of garbage – they shouted down the organizers and then pulled the plug on them. The demonstration became a debate, as other Party members waded into the crowd with newspapers and leaflets. Then the Arab and other foreign students joined in. The University of Washington had a large number of students from the Middle East. At the beginning of the demonstration, they could only stay out of sight – there had already been attacks on them. But now it was possible to come out and join in the argument with firsthand accounts of exactly what U.S. foreign policy meant to the people of Iran, to the Palestinian people, to the people of the world. The anti-Iran demonstration had become an anti-imperialist teach-in.

The next day, the same people tried again to organize an anti-Iran demonstration, and again the same thing happened. There were fights, there were arguments, but at the end of the day, the demonstration was broken up and turned into a teach-in.

I wasn't there the first day. Although I had come back from Pasco with my little brother about six months before, I had continued to stay out of contact with the Party. But when I heard on the radio about what had happened at the University, I knew I had to be there. The second day, I was one of the people who waded into the crowd with newspapers and leaflets. For the rest of that spring, all the way through the first hostage crisis, we marched down the streets chanting...

Red white and blue

We spit on you

It was nothing like the Sixties. Back then we were on the winning side. Back then I had read Mao saying things like:

“A revolution is not a dinner party, it is not writing an essay, or painting a picture. It is nothing so refined or genteel. It is a civil war, where one class overthrows another.”

But even though I knew and understood this intellectually, in my gut I imagined the revolution as us marching arm in arm with the masses in their hundreds of millions against a tiny handful of capitalists and their pitiful lackeys.

Now the tide had turned, and the Party was going into the face of it. All through 1980, we consoled ourselves with tales of how at the beginning of World War I, anti-war Bolsheviks were dragged from speaker podiums all over Russia and in some cases literally torn limb from limb by angry, patriotic crowds – but three years later came the October Revolution.

In the middle of all this, the Party put out a call for demonstrations on May 1st, 1980 that would make May Day the center of controversy and front page news on every newspaper in the country. It seemed an unlikely possibility, but they set about working methodically to make it happen. One of their big ideas was to organize May Day Brigades – groups of revolutionaries drawn from a large geographical area – who would travel up and down the country blitzing cities and stirring things up. The idea was drawn from Mao’s tactics of guerrilla war – how to achieve a relative concentration of superior force in situations where your overall numbers might be small.

By the time they got to Seattle, the West Coast May Day Brigade had already done plenty of stirring things up, most notably in San Antonio, Texas, where they climbed up onto the Alamo and replaced the Texas state flag with a red flag. That got plenty of attention, not just in the U.S. but all over Latin America, where the Alamo was *the* hated symbol of Yankee imperialism.

Now they were in Seattle and making a report on their first week in the Emerald City. There was a good crowd gathered at the Worker Headquarters in Rainier Valley where the Party based its operations. A hundred, maybe a hundred and fifty people were crammed into the largish one-room building. Most of the Party was there, as well as people they worked closely with. One of the Brigaders, a large, kind of rough-looking Chicano from somewhere down south, was giving a speech about their visit to Bethlehem Steel.

“When the whistle blew, and all these white workers came streaming out the gates, we didn’t know what to expect. I mean they wasn’t all white – there was a chunk of Black and Chicano – but they was mostly white, and I was kind of nervous...”

He kind of chuckled and so did we – he didn’t look like the nervous type.

“I mean there we were, wavin’ all these red flags and yellin’ about U.S. imperialism and revolution, and they’re streaming out through the gate, and this big burly white guy comes up to Charity... I mean he just towered over Charity, he looked like he could just stomp on him with one foot...”

We all laughed again. Charity was Shannon's boyfriend now. They'd been together ever since she and I broke up. When they'd formed the Brigade, he'd taken a leave of absence from Bethlehem steel and was travelling up and down the coast with it. Charity was quiet and reserved, and impeccably polite as long as you

didn't cross him, but we all knew he'd been a stone-cold killer in Vietnam and was still trying to get over what he'd let the army turn him into...

The Brigader kept on with his story. "And this guy yells at Charity and he says, 'Gimme that flag.' And Charity grins and the guy grins, and he grabs the flag out of Charity's hands and he waves it up over his head and yells, 'Come on, guys.' And about a dozen more steel workers join up with us and we get into formation and we march down onto Bethlehem property.

"And the workers are streaming past us, and some of them are giving us dirty looks, but a lot of them are taking leaflets and raising their fists in the air, and some more of them are joining us, and we march right up to the gate and start shaking it, chanting, 'We the slaves are here to say, long live the first of May,' and the guards are inside and now *they're* looking kind of nervous, like they're thinking, 'What the fuck do we do now?'"

Another Brigader stands up, a white woman from Portland – I vaguely know her – and she says, "The comrades at Bethlehem Steel have really done some good work there. I think we were all inspired."

There are murmurs of "Right on" from the rest of the Brigade. She continues, "Todd Shipyards was a night and day difference. I guess maybe we were all expecting something similar to happen there..."

Most of the Brigade laughs, like she's just told a really good joke. Then they all sort of take turns telling the story.

"I never seen anything like it."

"They just come out and jumped us. It seemed like it was organized."

"I think it was some kind of fascist group. They were all saying the same phrases, like they learned them out of a book..."

“They was waitin’ in ambush, I think.”

“They were the ones who got ambushed.”

More laughter, then the first Brigader kind of gathers in the reins of the story again. “We set up a perimeter, so no one could get hit from the back. We don’t start anything; we’re just passing out leaflets and the agitators are takin’ turns rappin’ out through the bullhorn. But when they started to attack us, we kicked their fuckin’ ass...”

“Language, Ray,” said someone.

“Sorry... we defended ourselves aggressively. It turned into a full-scale riot, with them swingin’ at us and us swingin’ back. And then other workers started gettin’ into it on our side.”

“I think there were some long-standin’ grudges being settled there.” It was Charity talking now. “People were just throwing down their lunch pails and their coats and getting into it. I heard one old Black guy say to one of the fascists, ‘You racist mother-fucker, I been waitin’ to kick your ass all my life.’”

“Yeah, I heard that.”

“So did I.”

“Maybe we got carried away a bit too.”

“I couldn’t believe it, Ray. You kicked that one guy’s head like it was a football.”

“Yeah, but did you see what he’d done to Jenny?”

“No mercy,” yelled Charity. A few others joined in.

“I think that gets across the flavor of what happened.” This was Shannon speaking. She was the regional head of the Party now that Gabe was gone. He’d come under a lot of criticism from the Party locally – I’m not sure why – and he’d

packed up his bags in the middle of the night and left for parts unknown. He didn't even tell Annie – he just disappeared.

Shannon was a good choice for spokesperson. She understood the importance of keeping things focused. That's what she was doing here. She was going for the main point, keeping her eye on the political line – and also maybe wanting to cut off a discussion that could be giving evidence to any police informers that might have infiltrated the meeting. “It’s absolutely right that we defend ourselves whenever we’re attacked,” she said. “But the most important thing is to remember why we’re there – to put out a revolutionary pole, an alternative to the Capitalist system. We know there’s people in the shipyards, in workplaces all over the country, who maybe don’t have a scientific analysis, but who hate the system they’re living under...”

It was at this point in the meeting that I got carried away. I leapt to my feet and said “Damn right!” And I gave my own speech about how I had worked at Todds off and on for years, and how the shipyards were full of revolutionary-minded workers.

I was thinking particularly of my old union, the Shipsalers. It was full of Black and other minority workers and Capitol Hill hippies who had been active in the anti-war movement. But the rest of the shipyard unions, even though they were predominantly white, had some pretty right on people too.

It was an easy speech to make then. I wasn't working at Todds. I wasn't working anywhere. But a week later I would finally get sent out on the new job I'd been training for ever since I got back to Seattle – fitter-burner-tacker in the Boilermakers Union. And it was to Todd Shipyards that I would be sent.

The first time I was sent out just as a burner. I lasted two nights.

Night number one, I was part of a gang of burners cutting something from underneath the hull of a tanker. No idea what it was. The ship was propped up on blocks on the dry-dock and we were spread out under the blades of the offending gizmo. Supervisors and foremen all around, just standing there watching us. I had a bastard of a time trying to get the burn started. The blades were half an inch thick. The way it's supposed to work, you get a little edge of the metal white hot, then sparks start flying and the tip of the flame starts cutting through the metal. I couldn't seem to get the sparks going. Instead of one little point, I had the whole damn end of the blade white hot – it was just about ready to melt off – before the flame finally started cutting. All the brass watching me. My first time on the job. I wasn't about to stop for anything. When the blob of liquid metal dripped down on my arm, I just kept going. I could smell the cotton of my jumper burning. Then I could feel it burning into my arm. I kept going.

It reminded me of my first job on the railroad. The tough guys would play chicken with cigarettes. They'd face each other, lay one forearm parallel with the other guy's, then place a lighted cigarette in the groove between their forearms. The really tough guys would have cigarette-length dueling scars along their forearms. I was never tough enough – or dumb enough – to play the game. Now I realized I could have been a champ. When I got home I took four aspirins and ran cold water over the burn for about an hour. It hurt like hell, but it looked like it would heal on its own.

The next night they had me working with a fitter and a welder on the inside of the tanker. We were in the bottom of the hold in one of the storage compartments. They were going to weld some new shelving onto the inside of the hull. But first I had to cut away the old shelving. I did – but I also cut an inch wide hole in the

hull. You could actually see the harbor lights flickering on the outside through the hole. It looked kind of cool, I thought.

They didn't.

So I suppose it's kind of amazing there even was a second time. But the first time they didn't fire me for being incompetent and dangerous, they just laid me off as if the work were finished. The second time I came out on the dayshift as a fitter – a job for which I was even less qualified. Fitter-burner-tacker is the full designation. So I was supposed to be a competent burner – plus I was supposed to read blueprints, cut the metal into the right-sized pieces, then spot-weld it together to wait for a production welder to come along and weld the seams. Basically a fitter is a carpenter who works with metal instead of wood. The problem was that I had no talent, interest, or experience as a carpenter of any kind.

My first assignment as a fitter was to weld a stanchion onto the top deck of a new-build ship. An easy job. I just had to measure a piece of a long metal cylinder, cut it off at more or less the correct place – less, as it turned out – then tack it onto the deck at a 90-degree angle. I didn't even have to measure the deck to put it in the right place – it had already been marked out for me.

Unfortunately, I broke the cardinal rule of fitting: always step back and smoke a cigarette before you do any final tacking. If I had smoked that cigarette, I would have noticed that the stanchion came “straight” up off the deck at about the same angle as the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

I had to burn the stanchion off and start again, which I did – unfortunately gouging a hole in the deck about the size of the one I'd gouged in the other ship's hull on swingshift. Just then the leadman came by to check on me.

This time I wasn't even laid off. It was a busy year in the shipyards and the hiring halls were empty, so the standard of incompetence you needed to get dumped was beyond even my formidable qualifications. The leadman just took me off that job and gave me a different job, idiot proof– or so he thought.

He put me in the bridge. I was supposed to cut a hole in the forward bulkhead, where the windscreen would go. The lines were marked out. The metal saw was in place. I mostly just had to push the start button and keep the saw blades from burning out. I didn't quite get the principle involved. Half a dozen burned out blades later, he took me off that job and set me to work with an experienced fitter and a production welder as a sort of a water boy.

The reason I mention all this is that it shows what a weak position I was in when the trouble started. The bottom line for point-of-production organizing is to be reasonably competent at your job – not a kiss ass – but good enough so nobody else has to carry the load for you. Of course, I wasn't at the shipyards to organize anybody. Even though I was supporting the Party on the outside, I had taken this job just so I could earn enough money to quit and spend some more time locked in my room, smoking dope and writing.

But what was I thinking? I knew the May Day Brigade had been there. I knew the Party was coming back. Obviously, the shit was going to hit the fan, and I would be right in the middle of it.

A week into my second job, working in a new union, with no friends, with an almost total lack of competence, I came into work early Friday morning and found Tony Mazola and three other comrades selling the Revolutionary Worker in the shipyard parking lot.

They were being harassed by some of the fascists. Tony was backing away from three of them. When he tripped over the old train tracks that ran through the lot, they closed in. I ran up to Tony and stood between him and the fascists. They backed off and tried to circle round to get at him from the other side. There were about a dozen fascists trying to close in on the four paper sellers. They would try to close in on one or two of the paper sellers, I would get between them, and they would back off. I couldn't figure out exactly what was going on. Why were they backing off from me. Did I look tougher? Hardly. Maybe it was because I was obviously a shipyard worker like them.

As the stream of workers going into the shipyards thinned out, the fascists got bolder. They closed in for a fight. Since they outnumbered us, we backed in between some parked cars so they could only get at us one or two at a time. Two of them got Tony on the ground. I pulled one off and then grabbed the other one by the scruff of the neck. He turned away from Tony and bit my thumb. I mean he really went for it. He got his teeth around the base of the thumb and tried to bite the fucking thing in two. I grabbed him by the hair and yanked as hard as I could. He opened his mouth and yelled.

“Hey! Quit pullin' my hair!”

And I let go.

It was an instant reaction – I did it without thinking – but I couldn't fucking believe it! He had been trying to bite my thumb off, and I let go of his hair as if I were embarrassed to be caught fighting dirty.

By now there were only a few of the fascists around us. It was only seconds to the final whistle. The rest of the fascists started heading for the gate. I turned to Tony. He had one newspaper left. The front was ripped in half.

“Gimme that fuckin’ paper,” I said. I took it off him and marched through the gate. Two of the fascists were following me. I’d seen them around. They were both in the Pipefitters Union. That figured – the highest paid, the most reactionary union in the yard, full of company men. They were both a few inches taller than me. One of them was clean shaven and goofy looking. The other had long hair and a long bushy beard – he looked like an extra from a ZZ Top video.

The ZZ Top extra saw the newspaper in my hand and said, “Are you one of them?”

“You damn fucking right,” I said.

It was totally illogical – I’d seen him as part of the fascists – but the long hair and beard made me half-trust him.

“He’s one of them,” said ZZ Top to the goofy-looking one.

“Yup,” said Goofy. “There’s gonna be a lot more of them.”

When I got inside, there were another half dozen of them waiting for me. They came at me from all sides and angles. A couple threw punches that I was able to deflect, but then all of them managed to get a hand on me. I couldn’t move, I couldn’t even twist my head. I could only blink when the fist came up out of the sky and smashed into my face.

“You’re gonna get us all fired,” I yelled. Talk about a lame comment. I could have called them cowards. I could have told them how chickenshit they were. I could have sung *The Workers Flag Is Crimson Red*, anything but that stupid comment. But I guess it did the trick. They all let me go and melted away.

I reported in to the leadman. He sent me to the tool shed to check out some equipment. By then my eye was already swelling up. I passed Goofy on the way to the shed.

“Nice one,” he said, as if he’d personally done the work himself, rather than just holding me while someone else did it.

“What are you grinning about, Goofy – you didn’t give it to me.”

That’s what I should have said – or something like it – but I just walked past him in stony silence. There was a long line when I got to the tool shed. While we were waiting, the talk turned to the Iran Hostage Crisis.

“We oughta just go in there and bomb the fuck out of them,” said someone.

“Go in and take over the whole damn country.”

“How old are you?” said the guy next to him. “You don’t look old enough to have been in Nam. Were you?”

“No.”

“I was. And I don’t never wanna see another war.”

“Amen to that,” said someone further up the line. “You think it’d be easy? They’d be fighting for their own country. That makes a big fuckin’ difference. You’d know that if you’d been in Nam.”

My head was starting to look like a balloon by now, but no one was looking at it or saying anything directly to me. Still, the whole conversation felt like they were talking about me – or to me. I don’t know how the word had spread that fast, but it felt like it had, like the first guy was attacking me personally, and the other two guys had come in on my side. I should have said something. Wasn’t this the chance to wave a red flag? But I just stood there numb and frozen.

When I got back to the ship with the equipment, the leadman looked at my eye and asked me if I wanted to go home. I said no. But by the time noon rolled around, I couldn’t see at all out of one eye and the other was starting to close up. I figured I’d better get home and put some ice on it.

I was staying in the collective house then with my little brother, my big sister, her son, her boyfriend, and a few other people. They all thought I should see a doctor. I wasn't going to go, but my head and thumb were starting to throb in counterpoint, so I went into the night clinic at Country Doc. They checked out my eye – it wasn't damaged – my nose – it wasn't broke. They didn't seem too worried. They just told me to keep it on ice for the weekend. Then I mentioned my thumb had been bitten, and they freaked out.

They spent about half an hour cleaning it. Then they gave me a couple shots, tetanus and something else, antibiotics, I guess.

“Outside of a few snakes,” the doctor said, “the most dangerous animal bite in the world is the human. If the throbbing doesn't stop, if you see any streaks of red, get back in here right away.”

Since all this happened on a Friday. I had two days to recover – and to piss myself worrying about what it was going to be like on Monday. Saturday night I had a date, the ex-wife of an old friend. It didn't occur to me to cancel just because I looked like a walking train wreck. I should have. Everybody stared at both of us. It was a long night for her – for me too – but nothing compared to Sunday night with Monday morning coming up fast.

Monday morning I got up early and ran a couple miles through Ravenna Ravine. I remembered a James Bond story where, knowing he was going to have a tough downhill ski race for his life, he did a few push-ups the night before to get in condition. At the time I thought, “How stupid – either he's fit or he isn't. A few push-ups aren't going to do anything but tire him out.” But now I was doing the same thing with the same pointlessness. The running didn't even undo the knots in my stomach.

By the time I got back and had breakfast, the Lump was pulling up on his motorcycle. That was my ride.

The trip to the shipyards took either an hour and a half by bus or half an hour by car. I didn't have a car, so I had advertised for a carpool. The only answer I got was the Lump with his motorcycle. I thought of him as the Lump because the closest thing I ever got to a conversation with him was a series of unintelligible grunts. He had one word in his vocabulary: "whatever". God, how I hated that word. When it enjoyed a resurgence of popularity twenty years later, I found myself wanting to rip out the throat of every teenager I met.

As I walked up to the Lump and his motorcycle, I gestured at my eye – in case he hadn't noticed. "I had some trouble last Friday. Some fascists jumped me because I was wearing this May Day button."

I gestured to the big red May Day button on my coat. Before Friday, no one had particularly noticed it. Now it was hardly necessary. "Did you read the leaflet I gave you Thursday?"

Grunt.

"What do you think of them taking over the U.S. Embassy in Iran?"

Grunt.

"A lot of people think it was wrong, but I think they had the right to do it, because the U.S. had been the de facto government in Iran ever since the CIA coup in the Fifties."

"Whatever."

"Are you bothered about me still riding with you?"

Another grunt – plus he held out his hand for my weekly contribution to the gas fund. I climbed on the back and we headed off to the shipyards, me dreading what was in store.

Fear. That's all. Nothing more. For the rest of the time I was at Todds, I wasn't shot, kicked, stabbed or beaten up. Nobody hit me again. Not once. But I got up each morning with fear tying my stomach into knots. I rode into work sitting behind that asshole on his motorcycle. I walked through the ship, picking up parts and delivering them to teams of boilermakers scattered through the tanks and holds. I was a walking opportunity for an ambush. And there were plenty of threats, seldom first-hand, usually something like, "Don't go down there. They're waiting for you – I heard them talking."

There were a few confrontations. The one I remember the best took place on the main deck amidships. The space between the bulkhead and the edge of the ship was narrow. It was completely deserted except for me, headed aft, and this other guy who popped up out of nowhere.

"You're the Communist," he said.

"That's right."

"You were never in Nam, were you?"

"No. Were you?"

"Yeah."

"Then you should know they were fighting for their independence. We were the ones invading their country."

"You ever had a buddy die in your arms, leaking blood out of a bullet hole?"

"No." Later I would wish I had come back with something like. "Did you ever see a buddy spitted on a row of rebar that the company was too cheap to cover

over? Did you ever watch him die with blood bubbling out of his mouth, asking you to tell his wife he'd be late from work – while the foreman was telling everyone else to clear out and get back to work?"

Well, actually I hadn't seen that either. It really did happen at a job I was working on back in Pasco, but I hadn't been there that day. I'd stayed home to get stoned. On the other hand, who knew if this guy had ever been to Nam? *Vietnam Veterans against the War* were constantly running into "Vietnam veterans" who had fought in imaginary army units in imaginary places.

He asked me about the May Day demonstration, and I was kind of puzzled because it almost seemed like a real question, like he was thinking about going.

"And that's a May Day button you're wearing?"

"Yeah."

"Do you mind if I look at it?" He reached out to tilt it an angle that made it easier to read. He studied it for a moment, then he ripped it off of my shirt. Then he sort of rocked back on his heels – waiting for me to jump him, I guess.

"That's okay," I said. "I've got another one in my pocket."

I sort of felt like I should leap on him, beat him to a pulp and take back the button while he lay helpless and semi-conscious on the deck – or at least pin a second May Day button on my coat and dare him to take that one off me – but it was a 200 foot drop from the deck to the launch-way and there were no witnesses. We stood there, staring each other down for another minute or two, then he shook his head and walked off back in the direction he'd come from.

I felt like I'd failed another test. Not that I should have fought him – that would have been stupid and pointless – but that I had cotton wool in my brain and

couldn't think fast enough to say what needed to be said, couldn't think clear enough to make it sound like real thinking and not just rhetoric.

Later that day, two guys came up to me. They were young, about my age, in the same union, I think. They started asking me questions. Was I really a Communist? Didn't I care about freedom? Did I really think people were free in China? Would I want to live there? I talked about Vietnam, about imperialism, about how the freedoms we had here were purchased with blood spilled in other parts of the world: it was safe to give us a free vote, because the U.S. was relatively prosperous, but that prosperity rested on the superprofits that came from our economic and military domination of half the globe. I told them that the U.S. had troops in over 100 countries around the world.

"If you feel that way," said one of them, "what are you doing here?"

"What do you mean?"

He slowed down his speech and spoke louder, as if he were talking to someone who didn't quite know the language. "Why are you working here?"

I forget exactly what I said... something inane like, "Well, I'm not independently wealthy. I have to work somewhere."

They both shook their heads, like they were wondering if I was dishonest or if I could really be that stupid. It wasn't until I got home that the penny dropped. We were building warships at Todd Shipyards at the time, the latest high tech version of a Naval Destroyer Escort, and we were getting paid top dollar to do it. They were asking the obvious question: if I was so opposed to the U.S. military, wasn't I being a hypocrite to work there?

It took me that long to understand the question, because I'd spent so many years as an activist where of course I would work in places like Todds – because I

was trying to organize them for revolution. But now I was just there for myself. It was a big money job that would let me work a minimum number of hours per year so I could spend a maximum amount of time writing.

I still didn't think I was a hypocrite. Maoists didn't think in terms of living a pure life where the key to doing the right thing was refraining from doing the wrong thing. It wasn't possible to live in an imperialist empire but not be part of it. It isn't a question of what you aren't doing in it, but of what you are doing to overthrow it. Still even by that standard I was pretty close to the line. I was wearing a May Day button and talking about revolution every now and then, but I was pretty much out for myself now.

All these years, I've thought the reason I was so inarticulate, so unwilling or unable to stand up on a table in the lunch room and yell at the top of my voice, "This is what I stand for and what I believe in, if you don't like it, fuck you," that the reason I didn't do this was just pure fear. But now I don't think that was the reason, not the main one anyway. I'd been scared before – maybe not quite so scared for quite so every minute of the day – but I'd been scared. The real difference was that I wasn't committed anymore. "As long as one is a monk, one goes on tolling the bell..." I was too stubborn and too ashamed to chicken out in front of all my former comrades, so I had lowered my head and was trying to push through it without backing down. I still believed in the cause, but mostly I just wanted to live long enough to finish my next play. I was sure that would be the one that would prove I was a real writer, that I hadn't just dropped out to watch T.V.

Hard to imagine a more dangerous way to play the situation. Because the thing is, there were plenty of people who were willing to support me – they

reached out more than once – but I was too scared, or too uncommitted to really go for it.

I started eating in the cafeteria because I hadn't made any friends yet, and it was safer than eating alone. The first day, I sat down at a nearly empty table. As it started to fill up, the talk turned to the confrontations at the plant gate.

"It kind of pisses me off," a young white guy was talking. "The papers make it look like we're all a bunch of fucking rednecks here."

"I know what you mean," said a hippie-looking guy, young, white, a short beard and long hair tied back in a pony tail. "The in-laws were over from Spokane this weekend. They were asking me if I was in on the fighting."

"The thing is," said a young Chicano right across from me, "there are some A-1 fucking rednecks working here."

"Amen," said the hippie-looking guy.

"The crew I was with this morning," said the Chicano, "we started talking about Iran. I was saying, 'You know, it's their fucking country, why don't we leave 'em alone.' And one of them says, 'As far as I'm concerned, that's our oil there, we ought'a just go in there and take it.'" He shook his head. "'That's our oil...' What do you say to an asshole like that?"

It was obvious they knew who I was. Besides wearing the May Day button, I was still sporting a black eye and a swollen face that made me look like a cathedral gargoyle. But I didn't join in the conversation. I just kept eating my lunch in silence. My tongue was frozen with fear. I didn't speak out unless I was in a situation that forced me to talk.

Later that same day I was sent down into a compartment in the foc'sle to make a delivery. Outside the compartment, a pipefitter stopped me.

“I wouldn’t go in there if I was you,” the pipefitter said.

“Why not?”

“They were talking about you... about what they’d like to do to you.”

I didn’t like the way he looked, like he was enjoying it, warning me, trying to scare me – carrying coals to Newcastle, if he only knew.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said, and swung open the port.

It was a large compartment. There were half a dozen guys working in it, most of them boilermakers – and a couple sheet metal workers. I dropped off the welding rods. They said, “Thanks.”

No big deal – except that I noticed one of the sheet metal workers was eyeing me fixedly. When I started for the door, he stepped in front of me.

“You’re that Communist, aren’t you?”

“That’s me,” I said. He was young, short and scrawny, but he looked kind of angry.

“You disgust me,” he said – loud enough to make sure everyone in the compartment heard. He was playing to the gallery. “Do you know what it’s like in Russia? Do you have any idea?”

I started to answer, but he cut me off. “My grandmother was born in Russia. She risked her life to get out of there. We have relatives that are still stuck there, that can’t get out, that are in fear of their lives because of the way they treat Jews.”

“I don’t think Russia is a Communist country,” I said. “It was – there was a real revolution there, but...”

He cut me off again. “Why don’t you go back and live there,” he said. “You people disgust me. As far as I’m concerned, anything that happens to you here,

you got it coming.” Then he stormed out of the compartment before I could say anything more.

The other sheet metal worker said, “Mike’s kind of excitable. He takes all this stuff pretty seriously.”

I gave a little speech before I left – about the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union, about why I thought things were different in China, about why I supported the Cultural Revolution... They mostly just went back to work and sort of pretended not to hear.

The next day, I had another delivery to make to the same compartment. The young sheet metal worker was there again.

“Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?” he said. He noticed the look I gave him. “No, no... It’s nothing like that. I just want to talk to you for a minute.”

“Okay.”

“I told my grandmother last night what I’d said to you, and she tore a strip off of my hide. She said that just because I didn’t agree with you, that I should respect that you were standing up for what you believe in. And that the way you were being ganged up on by some people here in the shipyards was the same kind of shit that we’ve had to face down through the ages. Uh... she didn’t use that word – shit. Anyway, so... I want to apologize. I don’t agree with what you’re saying, but... I apologize.”

He held out his hand. I shook it.

I don’t remember what I said. All I can remember is what he said and how surprised I was. He’d made a point of saying it in front of the whole compartment, so everyone who’d been there yesterday when he jumped on me could hear him apologize and see him shake my hand. I wish I’d known his grandmother.

Meanwhile, the Mayday Brigade had worked their way back down the West Coast. They were in LA now. Wednesday, we heard on the news that Damian Garcia, one of the three May Day Brigaders who had climbed up on the Alamo and raised a red flag, was stabbed to death in a barrio in East LA. Denny, another of the three, was stabbed almost to death at the same time. It was an obvious police hit done under the guise of a gang attack.

I hadn't actually met Damian when he was in Seattle, so it didn't hit me as hard as those who had eaten and slept and marched with him, but we were all kind of in shock. Not surprised though – the attacks in the press and on the streets just kept getting more intense every day.

That Thursday was the next and final big rally outside the shipyard gates. When the Lump picked me up in the morning, I told him I wouldn't be riding with him anymore. I said I didn't think it was fair to put him in jeopardy over a political cause he didn't necessarily support, so I would take the bus from now on. I was hoping for some kind of a response from him, something more than a grunt, and I got one. He said, "Whatever."

I ate lunch that day with a Capitol Hill hippie working as a burner in the Boilermakers. He was out on a short call. He'd just started work that Wednesday and today was his last day. He wasn't driving himself, but he was pretty sure the guy he rode with wouldn't mind giving me a ride as far as Capitol Hill. I could get a direct bus from there.

Why would I need a ride if I was going to be at the rally? Surely someone there would have given me a ride. Of course they would. But I wasn't going. I'd received enough threats over the past two weeks to be pretty sure that when the

fighting broke out, I'd be the main target. I didn't want to be the target. In other words, I was chickening out.

We were late getting out through the gate. Not my choice – I wanted out of there as fast as possible. I could see the red May Day banners up ahead. There was a large crowd of shipyard workers swirling around them. I kept the hippie between me and the banners. I wasn't sure who I most didn't want to be seen by – the neo-Nazis or my comrades. When we got to the truck, he introduced me to the guy who was driving.

He'd already heard of me. He looked at my black eye and said, "The price you pay for being an honest man..."

I felt oddly comforted, like my dad had said he was proud of me. He dropped off the anarchist on Capitol Hill. Then he drove me all the way back to the North End.

"Too bad I'm going on vacation," he said. "Otherwise I'd give you a ride every night."

He didn't say anything about giving me a ride when he got back. I think we both knew I wouldn't last that long.

That night, there was a big meeting at the Workers Center. Everybody was buzzing about the fight at Todds. As I wandered around the hall before the meeting, people would come up to me and say things like, "Fred, you're alright! I didn't see you there. I was worried."

No one was accusing me of not being there. It had been a violent, confusing scene – they all just thought I'd been in a different part of the crowd. I didn't lie. I said I'd gone straight home without stopping. It didn't seem to me like they really took it in. Nobody denounced me for cowardice. They just nodded and started

talking about everything that had happened, filling each other in on the details – no one knew them all.

At first the demonstration had spread out, selling newspapers and passing out leaflets. Of course a lot of the workers just streamed by, anxious to get to their cars and get home, but a good sized crowd stuck around to check things out. Then the fascists had come out and started attacking anyone who was isolated from the main body of the demonstration. Most of the leafletters got back to the main body and formed a defense perimeter, but not everyone. There were clumps of fighting breaking out all over the parking lot.

The workers who had joined in and defended the last demonstration didn't this time. Their defense had mostly been based on general principles or active dislike for the fascists, but they weren't down for a fight outside the shipyard gate every other week. So the demonstration had the character of outside agitators versus the local fascists. The demonstrators were probably outnumbered by the fascists. It was hard to tell – there were a hundred or more workers milling around, but most of them were just spectators, and it wasn't clear where their sympathies lay.

The West Coast May Day Brigade was long gone now, and the percentage of demonstrators who could really handle themselves in a fight was a lot lower than before. They held their own, but they were gradually being beaten back. The fascists were more organized this time. They were also gutless. If the odds were three to one, they would wait for better odds. But when the better odds came, they really went for it.

It was a confusing situation. The fog of war, I guess they call it. Most of the demonstrators ended up inside the perimeter in a standoff with the fascists. But

some were still out in the crowd, talking, selling papers, handing out May Day leaflets – or fighting. Mika, who was an obvious target – small, female, Asian – was out on her own the whole time, rapping a mile a minute, talking to the crowd, asking them questions, getting them to talk back. Karate of the mouth – nobody laid a hand on her. Others hadn't been so lucky.

Nelsen probably got the worst of it. He had been knocked to the ground and kicked around a bit but fought his way back up to his feet. Then he saw Annie knocked to the ground. He jumped into the clump of fascists that were starting to kick her and swung his picket sign like a baseball bat. Nelsen was quite an athlete. He hit a home run on some guy's nose, and the guy went down like he'd been pole-axed. That gave Annie time to get away, but Nelsen was knocked to the ground again and kicked unconscious. Mack and some of the other Vietnam vets organized a flying squad and started pulling the stragglers back into the main perimeter. By the time they got Nelsen inside, he was conscious but didn't seem to be entirely aware of his surroundings.

As the crowd thinned out, it became a straightforward confrontation between the demonstrators and the hardcore fascists. There was nothing to be gained by staying any longer. The tactics of evacuation had been planned out ahead of time. Most of the demonstration dispersed gradually in groups of two or three, until there were less than a dozen, mostly Vietnam vets left. At that point, two cars came speeding round the corner, slowing down just enough for the vets to jump into the moving vehicles.

It would have been a clean getaway except for one thing. Harbor Island was a traffic bottleneck at rush hour. There were two shipyards, a large flour mill and assorted small businesses all trying to exit the island on one road at around the

same time each afternoon. The two cars sped away from the Todds gate, leaving the fascists in the dust, only to come to an abrupt halt when they hit the tail end of the traffic jam.

The fascists caught up with the second car while it was still stuck there. They kicked at the car, but it was an old junker – you couldn't make it much more of a wreck without sledgehammers – so they started to rock it. The vets were pinned inside, unable to do anything, as the rocking motion built up to the point where it looked like the car might be tipped over. Mack was inside. He said you could see the fascists kind of hesitate for a moment, like they were thinking... this is pretty serious, are we really gonna do it? Then they decided. They bounced the car up onto two wheels – it almost went over. On the next bounce it would. But just then the traffic ahead cleared, the driver floorboarded it, and when the car rocked back onto four wheels, it shot forward and out of there. The end of an eventful afternoon.

The mood at the Workers Center that night was upbeat. Overall, the demonstrators had gotten the worst of the fight, but everyone had survived more or less intact, and the Party didn't do pessimism.

Shannon gave the keynote speech for the evening.

“Today was a great victory for revolutionary internationalism...”

General laughter, as someone – I think it was Nelsen – said, “I don't know if my bones can take another victory like this one.”

Shannon laughed too, but then she went on. “I didn't say it was an easy victory. But it was a real victory. And it was an important victory. This year is a crucial turning point in the U.S. The ruling class is trying to turn back the tide of the great victories that were won in the Sixties and early Seventies. They're trying

to use the revolution in Iran and the takeover of the U.S. embassy as a rallying cry to change public opinion back to when they had a more or less free hand to invade any country where their interests were threatened.

“But they’re in for a big disappointment, because the genie has been let out of the bottle – or rather, the genie has fought its way out of the bottle – in this country – with marches and picket lines and fighting in the streets, and yes, even dying. And the courage of the Vietnamese people, who fought the most powerful army in the world to a standstill, will not soon be forgotten.

“But things never stay the same in this world. Either they go forward or they go backward. And that’s why this May Day and the demonstrations leading up to it are so important. We have to show the way forward. Our numbers are few, and we can do little entirely on our own. But we will never be alone, as long as we have the courage to hold up the red flag of revolution and tell the truth about imperialism.

“There are millions of people in this world, who may not have a scientific understanding of imperialism, but they know it in their gut, and they hate what it has done to them and their loved ones, and they hate what it’s doing to people just like them in the rest of the world – and they dream of a better world, but they don’t see how that could ever happen. Don’t underestimate these people. Don’t underestimate their idealism. Don’t underestimate their courage. The world is full of people who would lay down their lives if they could see a way to change the world and give their children a real future.

“And that’s our job, to be a rallying point for these people, to show them that they’re not alone, that we are a Party that is not afraid to go up against imperialism right here in the belly of the beast, and that if they join us, we have

the tools, we have the science of Marxism-Leninism, forged in life and death struggles all over the world... If they join us, we can build a revolutionary movement strong enough to tear down imperialism and build a new world.

“On to May Day!”

We all leapt up and chanted “On to May Day! On to May Day!”

The next day was Friday, April 25, the day President Carter announced that a secret attempt to rescue the Iranian hostages, “Operation Eagle Claw”, had failed before it ever got off the ground. A helicopter crash at a remote staging area in the desert had caused the mission to be aborted and had cost the lives of eight U.S. military. Word leaked out in the early hours of Friday morning, long before the official announcement.

Maybe that was the trigger. Maybe it was just follow-up on the previous day’s fighting. Whatever – as the Lump would say – three of the guys who had ratpacked me the week before were waiting outside the gate. They were wearing football helmets and carrying club-length pipes. They were waiting by the bus stop, waiting to see who got out – clearly the Lump had been talking.

Fortunately, the three ratpackers were busy playing to the small group of workers gathered to watch, so they didn’t notice me looking out the window as the bus pulled up. I slid down in my seat out of sight and stayed on the bus. When it got to the next stop on the other side of the island, I got out.

Now was the time to decide. Should I go to work? I could easily sneak through the back end of the parking lot and get in without being noticed. No, I headed in the other direction, towards the tavern at the far end of the island. I called Tony Mazola from a pay phone. He drove down with Shannon and picked me up. Over coffee at a nearby MacDonald’s, I told them about the ambush.

Shannon asked me a lot of questions about the situation inside, mostly stuff she knew already, just trying to get a handle on how much support I had inside – which was not much.

“Maybe you shouldn’t go back,” she said.

“Nobody would blame you,” said Tony.

“No one would blame you,” agreed Shannon. “On the other hand, if you do go back, maybe the safest thing is to take a chance and do something that seems like asking for trouble... you could put out a leaflet, an open letter to Todds workers. Draw attention to yourself, let them know just how chickenshit the attacks on you have been. Let them know why you’re wearing a May Day button and why you’re going to the demonstration.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Are you sure?” said Tony.

“Yeah. Things couldn’t get any worse.”

“I don’t think that’s the way to look at it,” said Shannon. “It’s a question of relying on the masses...”

“That’s what I meant,” I said. “I think I’ve kept my head down too much. I’ve just made things more dangerous by being afraid to step out.”

I meant what I was saying. I would give it a go. I knew Todds was full of progressive workers who hated what was going on. I should rely on them. But also in the back of my mind – I think it was still in the back at that time – I realized that if I was caught passing out leaflets inside Todds, I would be fired on the spot. End of problem. That is, if I was caught by management. If I was caught by the fascists, though...

I spent the weekend working on the leaflet with Shannon and Tony, trying to make it clear and jargon free. I still have copies of it. It amazes me every time I read it. I was in such a cocoon. It's full of what feels like rhetoric to me now, stilted phrasing, lame attempts to "talk street". If I wrote it today, it would say the same things, but it would be a lot shorter, less defensive, less trying to dress up what I believed in and make it more palatable.

What I've learned over the years, so I believe, is that most of the time when people say something – a leaflet, a story, a play – is "too political", the problem is that it is not political enough. It skirts over the contradictions, rather than digging deep and exposing them clearly and simply.

Whatever.

I went to work that Monday with a backpack full of leaflets. By the time the lunch whistle blew, I had spread them out in every locker room and cafeteria in the yard. I didn't get in many conversations – I was trying to get the maximum number of leaflets out before I got busted for it – but I did run into one sheet metal worker who looked familiar.

"Is that a leaflet you're passing out," he said

Busted. I was in the sheet metal workers locker room. It should have been empty then.

"Don't I know you?" I said. "I've seen you at demonstrations, haven't I?"

"Maybe."

"Well, I'm asking for your support now..."

He interrupted. "Never. I hope you get fired. Or put in the hospital, I don't care."

"What?"

“You’ve fucked things up good and proper here. You and your May Day Brigade. Before you got started, I could talk to the guys in my union. I could talk about Vietnam, the environment... I could get them round to agreeing with the idea of socialism without them even realizing that’s what they were agreeing to.”

“What’s the good of that – if they didn’t even realize what they were agreeing to? I don’t think you can resolve contradictions by pretending they aren’t there.”

“That’s typical of the way you people think. Everything has to be a confrontation. Now you’ve polarized everything. It’s ‘us and them’ for everybody around here, and ‘them’ is anyone who has anything to do with socialism.”

“Did you talk about Iran?”

“That’s not the point.”

“I’d say it is right now.”

“No it isn’t. The point is how workers are getting screwed over here by their own government. That’s where you can get some agreement.”

“Well, take a leaflet anyway. Let me know what you think.”

He took a leaflet from me. “I know what I think,” he said. He crumpled it up into a ball and threw it on the floor.

“I don’t have time for this,” I said.

I left, did a couple more locker rooms, then doubled back to the sheet metal room again. He’d taken up all the leaflets and put them in the bin. I covered the locker room with leaflets again and moved on.

After lunch, the foreman called me into his office. There was a handful of leaflets on his desk.

“Did you pass these out?” he said.

“Yeah.” There wasn’t much point in denying it. My name was on the leaflets and I’d been seen doing it.

“Well, you can’t do that here. I’m gonna have to terminate your employment.”

I felt like kissing him. Instead I said, “I have a right to tell people about what’s been happening to me. Todds certainly hasn’t shown any interest in stopping the attacks.”

“File a grievance,” he said and handed me the termination papers.

I left with a song in my heart – and hid between parked cars in the parking lot until my sister came to pick me up. My first stop after she picked me up was the Boilermakers hiring hall, where I filed a grievance and dropped off some leaflets in the waiting room. I didn’t expect much to come of either. The leaflets would disappear as soon as the office noticed them, and the grievance was probably already filed in the wastebasket, which was fine with me – my worst nightmare would be going back to Todds.

Next stop was the Shipscalers hiring hall. I knew the guy working behind the window. It was Doug, a bearded, long-haired Capitol Hill hippie.

“You’re alive!” he said, shouted actually, and came out and shook my hand. He grabbed my arm and squeezed like he wanted to make sure I was really there. “We got a call that you’d been found unconscious in a pool of blood outside Lockheed.”

“Why would I be at Lockheed? I was working at Todds.”

“I don’t know – that’s what the call said.”

I gave him some leaflets and put some in the hiring hall next door. He said he would probably come to the demonstration, but I didn’t believe it. I knew Doug

from the anti-war movement. He'd joined the Scalpers a couple years after I left to work at Paccar, and he was a union officer now. Quincy was gone – I think he'd been pushed. Reuben was retired. The new business agent had been part of the movement to get rid of Quincy when I was there. Second time lucky.

Doug had been around the Party a lot in years past, but he had drifted away long since. Some people, like me, when they leave the Party, just drop out because they're lazy and discouraged. Some leave because they have a major disagreement. Others seem to need to come up with a political difference, whether there is one or not, to justify their defection. It seemed to me that Doug was in that camp, but of course, who could tell for sure? Not even Doug, I suspect.

That night I went out with my sister and her boyfriend, Luca, to celebrate getting fired. There was a cool band playing at the Pioneer Square tavern. The bouncer saw my black eye and looked me over like he was wondering if he should call for backup.

“What are you looking at him for?” said Luca. “If I was you, I'd be looking for the guy who gave it to him.”

We all laughed – except for the bouncer.

During the break, we went out with the band to smoke a joint in the alley. Someone had stenciled onto the brick wall in neat black letters: SALVATION IS FREE. Underneath, someone else had scrawled: *SO IS HELL*.

The day of the demonstration came. It was a Thursday. The weather was mixed, sun and rain. We would gather near Garfield High School, march up to Yesler and then head for downtown.

My brother Billy, my sister Anna, her boyfriend Luca and Anna's son, who was only about five years old, were going to come on the march with me. I tried

to talk them out of it. Not what the Party would have wanted, obviously, but I was worried for them, especially my nephew who was not much past the toddling stage.

“I don't think you guys get how dangerous it might be,” I said.

“I think we do,” said Anna. “Who took you to the doctor’s after they beat you up?”

“They didn't beat me up,” I said. “They just got in one really good punch.”

“Well, that's not gonna happen today,” said my little brother.

“I don't want you to do this just out of loyalty to me.”

“You underestimate us,” said Anna.

“Remember *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*?” said Luca.

We'd all gone to see the movie together. I kind of liked it. Luca hated it. “The whole thing was ruined for me at the end,” he had said, “when the aliens leave the spaceship and the President of the United States comes up to them and they shake his hand. If the aliens were supposed to be so advanced, why didn't they at least slap him in the face?”

“Of course I remember” I said.

“Well,” said Luca, “if the aliens are watching now, we'll show them a better class of human today.”

So my whole family was there on the march. It wasn't huge – a couple hundred people I think. We gathered in the field next to Garfield High School. The school was an icon of Black politics and culture. Jimmy Hendrix, Quincy Jones and most of the Seattle leaders of the Black Panther Party had gone to school there. For a long time, the Black Panther office had been across the street. I felt safer there than I ever had the last few weeks at Todds Shipyard.

Some of the students cut class for the march. A few joined in, but most were just curious. They gathered on the hill overlooking us. Most of those on the hill were young Black boys. Some of us gathered leaflets and went up to talk to them.

“What's going on?” they said.

I started talking about U.S. imperialism and world revolution. As I was talking, a few young men slightly older than the rest joined the crowd and moved in close to me.

“You're trying to corrupt these kids,” one of them said.

“No, I'm not.”

“You're trying to draw them away from their own culture and get them to fight for a white man's cause.”

“It's not a white man's cause, it's about the people of the world, of all colors. And as for Black culture, the biggest influence on the development of Maoism in the U.S. was the Black Panther Party. They were the ones who first started talking about Mao Tse Tung thought. They were the first ones to start passing out Mao's little red book – at a May Day rally in Oakland in 1968. And their biggest influence was Malcolm X, when he came back from his pilgrimage to Mecca and started talking about internationalism...”

I was really getting into it. It was an easy thing to talk about, because Black liberation struggles and the Black Panthers had such a strong influence on the development of our Party. I think the young men were surprised at all the connections. But I could see that our march had started. The front of it had already reached the crest of the hill and would be out of sight in a minute. I realized I was alone in the field now – everyone else had left. So I passed out the last of my leaflets and joined the march.

When I caught up with my family, Luca was carrying a garbage can lid.

“What's that for?” I said.

“I guess I don't need it anymore,” he said. He ran back a few houses and put it back on top of a garbage can.

“They were throwing rocks at us,” said Anna.

“Who was?”

“The kids on the hill.”

“But I was up there talking to them. They seemed interested.”

“Some were, others were throwing rocks, especially the older ones.”

The rest of the march was uneventful. A lot of people came out of their houses to check out the signs and take leaflets. As we left the Black residential area and entered the whiter downtown part of the march, reactions became more hostile, but there were no attacks. We rallied in the Pike Place Market, made a few speeches – I don't remember any of them, I never do – and May Day 1980 was over.

I didn't go to the May Day demonstration the next year. I didn't feel like I had to. When I went by the Party bookstore a couple days later, I saw the back of Tony Mazola. He had just left the bookstore. On some strange impulse, I ran up behind him and went, “Boo!”

He cringed, visibly, and then swung around with his fists up. I could see that his face was bruised and swollen.

“Oh God, I'm sorry, Tony. What happened to you?”

“We got attacked at the Pike Place Market on May Day. We had to fight them off.”

I was ashamed. The next year I went to the May Day demonstration. It was at the Pike Place Market again. This was becoming a regular feature of May Day now. The demonstration was a lot smaller that year because most of the Party had gone to a national demonstration in Chicago. The attacks were smaller too – but nastier. Someone spayed battery acid into the eyes of one of the Iranian students who had joined the rally. Fortunately, a young hippie guy with a canteen full of water came out of the crowd and rinsed the student's eyes with water.

It looked like no permanent damage had been done, but tempers were hot now. Mine certainly was. When someone started shoving another Iranian student, I got between them and surprised myself by saying, “You lay another hand on him, and I'll break your fucking arm.”

The guy who was shoving the student looked surprised too, but he squared up to me and said, “You think you're mad enough?”

Actually, as I figured out later, what he'd really said was: do you think you're *man* enough? But I misheard him. The guy was younger than me, a kid really, and bigger, but not a lot bigger. On the other hand, he looked real fit. If I'd heard him right, I probably would have said, “I don't know. I might be. I might not”

I couldn't be sure I was *man* enough, but I knew I was *mad* enough.

So I said, “You bet your fucking life I am.”

Naturally, he took that as a challenge and tried to reach past me to grab the student. I don't know exactly what happened then. The next thing I knew, he was on the ground. I had bitten off half his ear and I was pounding his face into the pavement.

The hippie with the canteen pulled me off of the kid. “Are you crazy?” he said. “You might have really hurt him.”

“They sprayed battery acid in someone's eyes,” I said.

“I know, but we washed it out with water. And you were pounding that kid's head into the pavement. He's only got one head.”

I couldn't think clearly then. I was trying to do some weird mental arithmetic in my mind... one head versus two eyes... but then a head has two eyes in it... I was so angry. I felt so protective towards the Iranian students. They couldn't go home because the Islamic fundamentalists would kill them. The U.S. government was trying to deport them anyway, and these students still came to our May Day rally because they wanted to stand up for what they believed in no matter what the cost. They were so brave.

Later the kid with the torn ear came up to me. “What do you believe in,” he asked, “that can make you so angry?”

I could see it was a real question he was asking. He wanted to know. I could have really talked to him then. He was listening. But I was still too angry to think clearly. I just yelled some rhetoric about U.S. imperialism killing people all over the world. He turned away. I still think about this sometimes. What a lost opportunity it was.

That was May Day 1982. May Day 1983 was another rally at the Pike Place Market. Nothing much happened. I don't remember anything about it. But I remember two months before, March 8, International Women's Day. We had a small rally at the Pike Place Market. Charity was in charge of security. I think he and Shannon were married by then. I was surprised when he came by to ask me to help with security, but I agreed.

Annie was doing agitation, making a series of speeches through the megaphone over several hours. She was talking about women's struggles around

the world, including in the U.S., battles for equal pay, for childcare, for freedom of choice in childbirth, against rape and violence. She would get the occasional heckle from the crowd, usually some young office clerk type who thought he was clever. But Annie had a stand-up comic's ability to deal with heckles, to use them to make her own points, to make a bit of theater and draw a bigger crowd.

But one heckler would not go away and would not shut up. He was a mountain of a man. It looked like he'd spent half his life in a gym, shooting steroids and pumping iron. It was a warm spring day and he was wearing just cut-offs and a muscle shirt. You could see muscles on muscles on muscles.

"Looks like she needs a good fuck," was about the pinnacle of his wit, but he was persistent, and he kept getting closer and closer to Annie. I looked around for Charity, but he had gone off to get more leaflets. There was just me and Mack, and I could see he was thinking the same thing as me. "Fuck! Are we gonna have to fight this mountain?"

No, as it turned out. Annie was more than up to the task of using him as a prop. The more he talked and the more threatening he looked, the bigger and angrier the crowd got, both men and women, who didn't like his sexist shit.

"Looks like what *you* need is a good fuck," said one of the women in the crowd.

"How's he gonna get laid, when he spends all his time looking in the mirror?"

Pretty soon, the crowd was roaring with laughter, and he was feeling like a fool, the prime example in an extended essay on male chauvinism. He slunk away with his tail between his legs.

When Charity got back and heard what the guy had been up to, he said, "Damn! I should have been here. We should have taken him out."

“Are you kidding?” said Mack. “The guy was a fucking herculoid.”

“One of us could have hit him in the back of the knees,” said Charity, “while the other two crammed a picket sign down his throat. He wouldn't have had much to say then.”

“We didn't need to do that,” I said. “Annie used him as a prop.”

“I don't care,” he said. “We shouldn't let men get away with that shit.”

A week later, Charity came by to make a self criticism. “You had the correct line,” he said. “The point was to win the political battle, not to show how tough we were. We had a talk about it inside the Party and decided to ask you to head up security for May Day.”

“Did I have the correct line, or was I just too shit scared to take him on? Charity, you should head up security. You'll do what you think is right no matter how scary it is.”

Six months later I left for Berlin.

11. RICARDO

After I decided to write a play about Damian Garcia – and after I'd convinced the Party that they should help me with the research for it – they put me in contact with Ricardo. I met him for the first time at a Pizza Hut on Capitol Hill. I'd agreed to pay for dinner somewhere, and he picked Pizza Hut, partly as a gesture of kindness toward my wallet and partly – as I learned during the evening – because they served cheap beer too.

I got there first. I'd seen him around a few times at Party events, so it was easy to pick him out when he came in, but I don't think I would have had much trouble anyway. Ricardo was a Chicano who had a strong hint of Native American in his features. He was about my height, but a bit stockier, and kind of good looking – devastatingly handsome, he would tell me later. He also gave off an air of irritable menace, like he'd just woken up and was feeling grumpy – and hungry, possibly considering tearing off one of your legs and eating it for breakfast.

He went straight to the counter and got a beer, then looked around. He smiled when he saw me. He had a beautiful smile.

“I liked your play,” he said as he sat down.

“You saw my play?”

“I liked the way you wrote about your brother – that was your family you were writing about, wasn't it?”

“Partly,” I said. “But I learned from my Dad to never let the facts get in the way of a good story.”

“I didn't learn much from my father. He was dead by the time I was six.”

“Sorry to hear it.”

“He was stabbed to death in a tavern about a block from our house. When my Mama asked the pigs if they would find out who did it, they laughed at her.”

“Bastards.”

“You got no idea,” he said, “living up here in white bread and mayonnaise land.”

“Shannon told me you grew up somewhere near where Damian was killed.”

“Why do you want to write about him?”

“Because he was a hero. His story should be told. But also, it's kind of a way of facing my demons as a writer.”

“The fuck does that mean?”

“If you're real political, it's hard to write about stuff without sounding like you're giving a speech. I thought I'd take on the most political subject I could think of. If I could write naturally about that...”

“So this is like therapy for you, not something real.”

“No, it's not therapy...”

“Why do you do it then?”

“Why do you drink beer?” He was about to start on a second one already.

“None of your fucking business, white bread.”

It went downhill from there. By the time he'd finished the second beer – a few minutes later – I knew it was time to leave. “Sorry it's worked out like this,” I said. “I could have really used your help.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” he said. “I'm a little out of hand here. Let's meet somewhere they don't serve beer next time.”

So that's what we did. It worked out pretty well. He was an okay guy when he wasn't drinking. And he was a gift from the gods when it came to writing about East LA. He grew up in Boyle Heights, a few blocks from Pico Aliso, the housing project where Damian was killed.

He told me it was like another world down there. “The pigs aren't just pigs there,” he'd say. “They're an occupying army. It's like they're on patrol in Vietnam.”

He told me his neighborhood was mostly Chicano and Mexican, but that there were a fair number of blond-haired blue-eyed kids running around too, because there'd been a lot of immigration from Poland between the two world wars.

He told me about the food – just rice and beans mostly – but you couldn't go anywhere, you couldn't visit any of your friends without their mother trying to fill you full of it. “You can't get rice and beans like that up here,” he said. “They don't know how to cook rice and beans here.”

He told me how much he hated dogs – his only canine contacts had been with police attack dogs.

When I got back from my two week investigation in LA, he started coming by my place more regularly – as much to ask me questions about what I'd seen as to tell me about the neighborhood he'd grown up in. By then, my brother Billy had

moved out of our collective house to a small apartment in North Seattle, and I'd moved back to Capitol Hill. Ricardo would drop by for a joint – he didn't get mean on marijuana, the way he did on alcohol. He had a good sense of humor, and he was a great storyteller. We got to be pretty good friends, partly because we had an understanding that if I opened the door and smelled alcohol on his breath, I would slam it right back in his face.

One day he came by with his girlfriend, Sherry, to ask me for help. I knew Sherry from the Party before I'd ever met Ricardo. She was a dishwater blond with thick glasses and a broad face. She was really shy and seemed a little slow – although it might have just seemed that way because of her extreme shyness. She must have been in her late twenties, but I had the impression that Ricardo was her first ever long term boyfriend. They lived together in a big apartment building, only a few blocks away from me, but a few blocks in the wrong direction. The building was a slum of the worst kind – a lot of drugs, a lot of alcohol, a lot of violence in the courtyard and the stairwells – a lot of it directed against women and children. Ricardo wouldn't let that happen. Somebody laid a hand on a kid or a woman in front of him, and he would stop it. No matter how big or how tough they thought they were, Ricardo would look them in the eye and say, “You can't do that.”

So far, nobody had called him on it. But he knew he was living on borrowed time.

“The thing is,” he said, “I'm not bulletproof. I don't even carry a knife. Sooner or later someone's gonna call my bluff – or just shoot me in the back. I got an ulcer from drinking, but this is making it a whole lot worse. I got nightmares every night...”

“Neither of us are getting any sleep,” said Sherry.

“I feel like shit about it,” said Ricardo, “like I'm abandoning all those kids, but we gotta get out'a there.”

“We thought maybe you'd know of somewhere... or that you could keep your eyes open...”

“Sure,” I said. “I don't know of anywhere right now, but I'll keep my eyes open, of course.”

A few weeks later, like magic, I found the perfect place for them. It was just off Broadway, a small apartment complex, six units in a horseshoe shape around an open courtyard facing the street. No dark corners where evil things could happen.

The next day, Sherry took time off work to go check it out. She left Ricardo behind in case the manager was a racist. The price was right. Sherry had good references. They moved in two weeks later.

“I think it was a good idea for Sherry to go in alone,” said Ricardo. “The manager did a double-take when he saw me. Well, fuck him, anyway.”

Ricardo was full of anger, not just about his own situation. I wrote a song about him once with a line that went, “He carried a scar for every wound that ever bled.” Too flowery, I know, but I think it was the truth. He'd spent a lifetime looking for answers before he found the Party. He tried Catholicism. I think he'd even been an altar boy like me, although he didn't like to talk about it. Then he'd tried Evangelical Christianity. Not all Evangelical Churches are the right wing nut-job types that get promoted in the U.S. mass media. A lot of Black and Latin churches are activist and very politically progressive.

“But it's still Christianity,” said Ricardo, “with all this bullshit about heaven and hell, and a Holy Book that's chock full of mass murder and genocide.”

The last thing he tried before he found the Party was the American Indian Movement. He'd gone out into the desert and gone through the whole sweat lodge ceremony. “We're all Indians,” he'd say. “A lot of Chicanos like to brag about how Spanish they are, but I reckon there's more than enough Indian to go around.”

Ricardo was real into his “mongrel pedigree,” as he called it. He'd say, “I got a United Nations in my blood stream.”

When he was stoned enough, he'd claim to be part Polish on his great-grandmother's side.

Once, he was passing out leaflets in the Central Area. This was back before I knew him, back before he'd drunk himself out of any kind of active work with the Party. He'd handed a leaflet to a couple guys who turned out to be heavy into Black nationalism. They didn't like it when Ricardo referred to them as “brothers”.

“Don't call me brother,” said one of them. “You ain't no brother to me.”

“I don't know that,” said Ricardo. “The Moors were in Spain for over 800 years. You can't tell me they didn't do some serious fucking.”

Ricardo loved Lucille Ball for marrying a Cuban man, for putting him on her TV show as a real man and not some kind of comic prop. He was impressed that I claimed to have seen every one of the original Lucy shows – legacy of a misspent childhood. I got extra points when I told him that as a kid I'd had an autographed photo of the Cisco Kid, complete with a drawn in horseshoe from Diablo, the Wonder Horse.

Ricardo was always talking about brown eyes and brown skin. He loved the ending of *Giant*, where the chorus sang, “*The eyes of Texas are upon you,*” while the camera focused in on the eyes of two babies in a crib, one with brown eyes, one with blue. He told me once, “Much as I love Sherry, I could never love her as much as a brown-eyed, brown-skinned girl.”

“That's a crap thing to say.”

“But it's true, Fred. When I told Sherry that, I knew it would hurt her feelings, but...”

“You told Sherry that?”

“I guess I was kind of a bastard for saying that, but...”

“Not kind of a bastard, a total, fucking asshole – who pays the rent on that flat anyway?”

“I pay some of the rent...”

“Yeah, and who always has the rest when you don't come through?”

“I said I was sorry afterward.”

“So did the wife beaters – I bet – in that building you moved out of.”

“Not all of them... not most of them... Fred, you don't really think I'm like them, do you?”

“No, but it was a mean thing to say.”

“You're right. It was a mean thing to say. I wish I hadn't said it. I just get so angry sometimes.”

He wasn't like them. He would never lay a hand on Sherry. But Ricardo was an angry man, and it didn't always come out in the best way, as I knew from experience.

On the other hand, sometimes a bit of rage is just what's called for.

The tenant who lived next door to Sherry and Ricardo was a young woman with a learning disability. She was just able to live in the outside world with the help of a social worker who would do things like paying the rent and utility bills for her. Sherry and Ricardo got to know her pretty well, because she would turn to them for day to day emergencies – like changing a blown fuse. Ute – that was her name, German, I think – was very beautiful, with a sweet, innocent face and a sexy, voluptuous body. She seemed to be a magnet for a certain kind of bastard. She had a string of abusive boyfriends. Nobody hit her, at least not in front of Ricardo, but mostly they didn't need to – it was so easy to make her cry.

The walls were thin between the apartments. Ricardo said he and Sherry could hear the boyfriends yelling abuse at her, and at night they could hear her crying herself to sleep. It was the most heartbreaking sound, and there wasn't much they could do to stop it. They could try to be friends to her in the daytime, but they couldn't live her life for her.

Her most recent boyfriend was the worst. They thought maybe he was hitting her, but they couldn't be sure. Then one night about three in the morning, they could hear him screaming at her, and the furniture breaking, and what sounded like Ute bouncing off the walls.

They both got up. Ricardo pulled Sherry's .38 Smith and Wesson from under the mattress and they ran to Ute's door and started pounding. When no one answered, Ricardo kicked in the door. Ute was crouched in the corner, blood streaming from her nose, the boyfriend towering over her. He spun round to face Ricardo and started to yell, but by then Ricardo had grabbed him by the hair and put the gun to his head. He said, "If you ever come back here, I'll kill you."

The boyfriend ran out the door. Sherry and Ricardo spent the night with Ute. She cried herself to sleep in Sherry's arms.

In the morning, Sherry went to work, and Ricardo went back to their flat to sleep. He woke up about two in the afternoon. The flat was dark because the drapes were pulled closed. When he peeked out through a crack, what he saw gave him a chill.

The apartment manager was talking to Sherry. He looked at the damaged door frame. Then he looked over at Ricardo's flat, then back to the door frame, then back to Ricardo's.

Finally the manager left. He came back half an hour later with some timber and a box of tools. After he'd completely rebuilt the door frame, he put the tools down, went over to Ricardo's and knocked on the door.

Ricardo said he thought about not opening the door, but decided, "Fuck it, I'm gonna have to face him sometime."

The manager said, "We know what happened last night. Ute told us how you kicked in the door. I've talked to the apartment owner about this, and I want you to know I'm in complete agreement with what he decided. When it comes time to pay the rent next month, don't bother. Keep your money. It's on the house... our way of saying we appreciate what you did."

I tried to tell this as close as I could get it to the way Ricardo told me. The ending was kind of a surprise to him. He was so sure Sherry and he were going to get evicted. Just as he'd been so sure the manager was a racist.

"You get kicked often enough," he said, "you're always expecting the boot. It can make you kind of stupid. I guess I got a bit of an education that day."

The funniest story Ricardo ever told me was about Charlie Grosman. Charlie had been raised in a hippie commune by a flower child mother and about twenty other flower children. He was a big guy – big and strong – but totally innocent and naive about the ways of the world. When he and his mother started working with the Party, Charlie was constantly getting into scrapes where his only fault was an extreme lack of street smarts.

Back in 1980, before I had got to know Ricardo, he, Charlie and another guy named Matt were going from tavern to tavern in Rainier Valley passing out May Day leaflets. Matt was new to town. He was in his early Thirties, a Black guy who had done hard time in prison in the South – I'm not sure for what – and then beat feet for the North as soon as he got out. Ricardo and Matt were plenty street wise, of course, but they didn't mind carrying Charlie with them – I think they reckoned his muscles would make up for his brains.

Ricardo said they went into one tavern where right away they knew it was a dodgy situation. The tavern was all Black, but that was no big deal in Rainer Valley. What made them nervous was that the entire tavern fell dead silent the minute they walked in the door. They decided to get a drink to give themselves a bit of time to get the feel of the place. Matt and Ricardo ordered beers. Then Charlie said to the bartender, “Do you have any milk?”

Matt and Ricardo cringed. They could tell the whole tavern was listening. Sitting next to Charlie at the bar was a middle-aged Black woman wearing a low-cut blouse. She said to Charlie, “Honey, I got milk right here.”

There was a ripple of laughter in the tavern. Matt and Ricardo looked for a crack in the floor they could crawl into. Charlie turned a bit red and said to the bartender, “Do you have chocolate milk?”

The woman in the blouse said, “But honey, this is chocolate milk.”

The entire tavern roared with laughter. Matt and Ricardo left their drinks on the bar and dragged Charlie out before he could open his mouth again.

“We loved that boy,” said Ricardo. “Didn't appreciate it at the time, but he gave us more good stories to tell...”

When I finally finished the play about Damian, naturally it was Ricardo I first showed it to. Not just because the play was set in his back yard, but also because he was such a master storyteller, I thought he would be the ultimate critic.

He came by to pick up the manuscript at – for him – the crack of dawn, about ten in the morning. It was a warm day late in the spring. He said he would go to a park and read it. I waited all morning... and all afternoon... By dusk I was starting to get nervous. I figured if he liked it, he would have raced through it and come back right away.

It was dark and starting to get a bit nippy by the time he came back.

“Sorry, Fred. I fell asleep in the park.”

“Shit. Was it that boring?”

“No, it was wonderful. I read it straight through non-stop. It was like being back home again. I cried my way through most of the second act. People were staring at me, but I couldn't stop. I heard a little Black girl saying, 'Mommy, why is that man crying?' When I got to the end, I went right back to the first page and read it again. By the time I finished, I felt like I'd been through a wringer. That's when I fell asleep.”

I quizzed him about the play for the next two hours, trying to find out what worked and what didn't. He clearly had read it carefully. He seemed to remember

almost every line, and he seemed to really like it, especially the characters I'd made up, that I'd based on the local people I'd interviewed.

I was over the moon.

Other people in Seattle liked it too. I wrote a second draft, then sent it down to the Party people in LA. I never heard back from them.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic Ocean, “The Hot Autumn” was about to begin. The United States was installing Pershing and Cruise missiles in Europe. Virtually no one in the general population wanted this – it would just make them targets in a nuclear war. But the heads of their governments said, “Fuck you, people. We're doing it anyway.” This provoked what would turn out to be the largest demonstrations that had ever happened in Europe. Demonstrations of over a million people would take place in England, Holland and France. Germany alone would have three demonstrations of over a million people, one in Bonn, one in Frankfurt, and one in Hamburg that would be closer to two million people.

The Party decided to send a contingent of revolutionary-minded people as a gesture of solidarity from the country that was sending the unwanted missiles. When they called for volunteers, I was the first in line.

Everybody else went with a round-trip ticket, but I had a one-way ticket, a saxophone and a sleeping bag. My plan was to stay there and support myself as a street musician. I never would have believed such a thing possible, if it hadn't been for the fact that my sister's boyfriend, Luca, had been a street musician in Europe for seven years

“They'll love you over there, Fred. Your songs have got feeling. They'll appreciate that.”

Luca was nothing if not positive. That was the beauty of Luca. That was also the problem – you couldn't rely on his good news, because he would never give you bad news. But I made up my mind to believe him this time, because I wanted to go to Europe.

I wanted to be a part of the demonstrations. It seemed like there might really be a new beginning happening there. Even from a distance you could feel the excitement and optimism

Also, I wanted to try to make it there as a writer. God knows nothing was happening for me in the U.S. It seemed like anything with the least bit of a leftist tinge would get trashed as being nothing but political rhetoric.

And perhaps most of all, although I only admitted it to myself later, when the next May 1st rolled around, I wanted to be 8,000 miles away from the Pike Place Market.

The last time I saw Ricardo was about a week before I left for Europe. He was going into a clinic the next day to try to quit drinking. It was probably his last chance. His liver had just about quit functioning. A single glass of beer would get him sloppy drunk.

We went to see a play at a new theatre a couple blocks from the Comet Tavern. It was a one-act by Barrie Keeffe called *Sus*. It was about a Jamaican guy in London who's arrested because they think he's murdered his wife. He's innocent, and they finally let him go, but only after a brutal interrogation. They knock him around a bit, of course, but the really brutal part is more psychological. They show him his wife's bloodstained clothes, but they won't tell him what's happened to her. They won't tell him what's happened to his children, where they are, if they're alive.

There are two cops: a psychopathic right-wing cop and a psychopathic liberal. At one point, the right-wing cop says to the Jamaican that he shouldn't blame the liberal cop, because he's just gone through this terrible trauma and it's unbalanced him – he's lost his best friend.

The liberal used to be on K-9 patrol with Rex the Wonder Dog. They were arresting a bunch of demonstrators and one of them ran for it. Rex the Wonder Dog bolted after him. The fugitive ran into a deserted building and tried to slam the door behind him, but he was too slow. Rex just managed to wedge his head between the door and the frame. He's snapping and snarling and trying to force his way in. The fugitive grabs a brick and starts beating on the dog's head, trying to force it back out. The psychopathic liberal cop is trying to pull the dog free, but it's no use – the dog gets his brains beaten out by the brick-wielding fugitive.

The whole time this story was being told, tears were streaming down the cheeks of the psychopathic liberal cop. We were in a theater in the round and I could see that most of the audience were crying too. Meanwhile, Ricardo was sitting next to me, pissing himself laughing. He'd been chased and bitten by too many Rex-the-Wonder-Dogs to feel any sympathy. I think he would have been glad to lend a hand with the brick. I tried not to laugh... I tried... but by the end of the scene half the audience was glaring at Ricardo and me, possibly thinking about using a brick on us.

After the play I said “You nearly got us killed, Ricardo, you know that, don't you?”

“Fuck all those animal lovers.”

“It's not their fault if they had a puppy when they were little and you didn't.”

“They got no idea, no idea what it's like. They think the pigs are there to protect them. I guess they are. We had to do things for ourselves...”

Then he started telling me about his best friend's sister. How she was raped. How everybody knew who did it, but the cops couldn't be bothered. Just everyday life in the barrio as far as they were concerned. So he and his mates decided to take things into their own hands... literally. They kidnapped the rapist and took him out into the middle of one of those wasted spaces in the middle of the city.

“When the guy saw what we were gonna do,” said Ricardo, “he started screaming. We'd got really drunk so we wouldn't chicken out. There was five of us. I was just holding one of his arms. I was kind of squeamish, you know, about holding his... It was kind of funny in a sick way, how his screaming suddenly jumped up a couple octaves...?”

“From the pain?”

“No, man, aren't you payin' attention? We cut his balls off. He started screaming in falsetto.”

“Bullshit.”

“That's the way it works, Fred. Haven't you ever heard of the *castrati*?”

“So you're tellin' me you cut his balls off, and that made him start singing soprano?”

“It was eerie, Fred. It was like he became a different person, like he became a woman.”

“You're makin' this shit up, Ricardo.”

“No, I'm not. That's the way it was. That's what happened.”

“Gettin' your balls cut off doesn't do nothing but cause you to scream with pain. The *castrati* had their balls cut off before puberty, so they couldn't produce

enough testosterone to make their vocal chords thicken. That's what makes your voice get deep.”

But Ricardo stuck to his story like a husband caught cheating... like a cop charged with brutality. For the first time it occurred to me that maybe Ricardo's other stories were not true. Maybe there was no little girl asking her mother, “Why is that man crying?” Maybe there was no Black woman in a low-cut blouse talking about chocolate milk. I'd seen his beautiful neighbor, but I knew nothing about her boyfriends or her learning difficulties.

I guess some things had to be true. Sherry was straight as an arrow, and she was there for some of his stories. But I didn't know what to believe and what not to – and I never would know. This was the last time I would see Ricardo. I was in Europe for nine years before I came back for the first time. Nobody knew what had happened to Ricardo.

But whatever the mix of truth and myth, I reckon the stories gave a true measure of Ricardo. They showed the anger and rage against oppression and cruelty. They showed the heroism – the good and the bad sides of it – the weak, helpless women and children, the big tough man taking on the world to defend them. They showed the alcoholism and the ulcers – because the world is so much bigger and tougher than any one man.

So, these are my stories – this book – stories about me and the Party, what we were trying to do, some of what we learned. When I left Seattle, I still agreed with the Party on just about everything. I don't agree with them all the way anymore. It's not so easy to believe all the stories we told each other. It's harder to see what the solution is and how to get there.

But as far as I can tell, all the fundamental contradictions of capitalism are still with us. The world isn't a safer place now – it's more dangerous. Imperialist peace looks a lot like war... in Palestine, in Iraq, in the Congo – and who knows what's coming for the rest of us? A steady stream of upper-class victims of the Cultural Revolution exit China with exposés telling about how they suffered in the bad old days. Meanwhile, Chinese peasants, who when Mao was alive had access to health care, education, drinkable water and breathable air, descend into hell. In the West, we still lurch from crisis to crisis, hoping that the next one won't be the big one, the next Great Depression, the next World War, or some other kind of new world-wide disaster.

I don't think the Party has all the answers anymore... Well, we never did think that. We just thought we were on the road. Now I don't know what the road is, and I don't know anyone else who does either. But to tell the truth, I think the Party is more right than I am: they're still fighting. Halfway through this book, I realized I was writing a love story about Fred and the Party. It ends in tragedy – we come to a parting of the ways – but like any true love, it never really dies.

Postscript: QUEERS

This is the part I left out. I didn't want to. It's too important. But I couldn't fit it into the narrative – the time frame is so different. It starts when I was a kid, years before I'd ever heard of the Party or even Vietnam, and it ends years after I'd left Seattle and made what now looks like a permanent move to London.

I don't like to end with this, because it shows the worst side of the Party – and my worst side too – or one of my worst (no one ever tells all their secrets). But maybe it's the right place to end, because it shows what has to change for next time.

I guess the place to start this is in the backyard in Pasco. Sometime in the late Fifties. Early night. Summer warm. At the back of the yard by the garbage cans, where we're not visible from the house. There's five of us. Me, Jerry, Mark, Bob and my younger sister. We're taking turns showing each other our genitals. I feel

a bit ashamed about this. Why was I letting them look at my sister's genitals? Not a very manly thing to do. No touching, but still...

Would Jerry have let us look at his sister's pussy? No way. If he'd known I'd actually looked at it and touched it he would have killed me – even though he and his brother treated their sister like shit. Kind of shoots holes in the theory I'm about to lay out, which is that in families with older brothers and a younger sister, they are very protective of the sister, but in families like mine, with one boy in the middle of two sisters, he is not very protective. And he is kind of a spy. So I let it happen in the backyard because I wanted to see my little sister's pussy. We all checked out each other's dicks, but the one pussy in the crowd was the only real interest.

Anyway, the point of this is what happened next. When it was Bob's turn to show us his dick, he waved it at me and said, "Wanna suck it, Fred? Come on, bend down and suck it. You know you want to, Fred... Suck it."

He was serious. He really thought I might. It never occurred to me that he might have homosexual urges – be turned on by guys – I still don't think it's very likely. He was just trying to bully me. He was a year older and bigger than me. I'd fought him to a standstill when we'd first moved into the neighbourhood, but I was older and softer now. I'd lost my bottle a bit. It was around that time that he backed me up around our backyard, saying, "Go on, Fred. I'll give you the first punch. Go on, take a swing," me backing up and not swinging, all the while Jerry following behind Bob, miming giant uppercut swings and mouthing "Go on, do it." But I'd lost my bottle, and I didn't get it back until I was in the Navy, when I decided, "Fuck it. I don't care if I win or lose, I'm going out fighting."

Anyway, the point is that I wasn't the least bit "queer" back then – just a bit chicken – and neither was Bob, Jerry or any of the rest of our gang, so far as I know... Well, there was the kid across the street, who had a shut-in mother who spied on us from their front room window. He used to like to play jump rope with the girls, and he never did fit in with our gang. We all thought he might be queer, but I don't know anything at all about his real sexuality.

That's the point. For me, for all of us so far as I know, the whole queer thing had nothing to do with sexual desire. It was about bullying and violence – kind of the way rape isn't about sex. Of course, I can't speak for kids who really were queer, except I am sure that growing up in Pasco back then must have been a living hell. Homophobia was all about being afraid to be thought to be queer – and there were such good reasons for being afraid.

I remember two jokes about being queer. The first was an ongoing joke, kind of a way of masking fear. Our high school had shown the movie *Advise and Consent* to all the seniors as part of the mandatory course on the U.S. government. In it, there is a bright young senator from Utah who commits suicide because he is being blackmailed about a homosexual incident in his past. The incident happened in a place called *The 602 Club*. The movie was shown in the autumn. For the rest of the school year, the boys would joke about it. We'd point to a guy we were passing in the halls and say, "Hey, you and me, 602, all the way."

My friend Sean started it. He could afford to – he was going out with the cheerleader who had the biggest tits in the high school. The 602 joke was a way of saying, "I'm such a stud, I can even joke about being a queer."

The other joke was a lot meaner. Maybe I remember it because it came from such an unlikely source. John was a youth counselor for one of the Protestant

churches in town. I was a Catholic, so I wasn't in any of his programs, but he was this cool guy who was "with it" and got along with young people, really listened to us, and liked to play the piano and talk about ideas. A lot of kids of both sexes and all religions liked to hang out with him, and so far as I know he really was a cool guy and did lots of good and no evil – except for this one joke.

Out in the Wild West, a stranger rides into town and there's this big commotion going on. He goes up to the sheriff and asks him about it...

Stranger: (in a high squeaky voice) Hey, what's going on, an election?

Sheriff (in a normal voice): Nope.

Stranger: Some kind of a parade?

Sheriff: Nope.

Stranger: Well, what then?

Sheriff: A hanging.

Stranger: (still in his high squeaky voice) Cool. I love hangings. They're so cool. With the guy dancing around and his feet all twitching and his tongue hanging out and stuff. Wow, lucky timing for me, huh, just coming into town. Looks like a lot of people came out for it. No wonder... by the way, what are they hanging him for?

Sheriff: He's a queer.

Stranger (in a deep bass voice): Oh, really?

Of course, you wouldn't have been lynched in Pasco for being a queer – it was a semiarid desert and there were few trees – but getting beaten to death in a dark alley was a distinct possibility.

The first time I ever met a queer – that I knew of – was Seattle in 1969. By then I'd been to college, got kicked out, gone back to college, dropped out, gone

in the Navy, got a medical discharge, and now I was back in college for the third time. I'd just moved into a group house with my friend, Bert, and a couple of his friends, John and Ron, who had scored this really cool house with low rent and only a block from the woods of Interlaken.

John worked at a bookstore and Ron worked at Sears. They were both pretty interesting guys with a love of good wine, a passion for music and a massive sound system – purchased at a discount from Sears – that could do justice to anything from Wagner to the Doors.

After we'd been living there for about two months, one night we were all sitting in the living room, and Bert got all serious and said, "John and Ron have something they want to tell you, Fred."

"Go ahead," said John to Ron.

"No, you do it," said Ron.

"Oh hell," said Bert. "I'll tell him. John and Ron are gay."

At first I thought they were kidding. Then, when I got that they were serious... "Why are you only telling me now?"

"We couldn't afford this house without you and Bert," said John. "And Bert wouldn't move in unless you did."

"So?"

"So we didn't know how you'd react," said Ron.

I was a little pissed that Bert hadn't trusted me enough to tell me from the start, but mostly the way I reacted was, "Oh, that's kind of interesting..."

Very interesting at times – like when they started running down famous queers that everybody who was in the know knew about...

"Rock Hudson?"

“Yup.”

“Cary Grant and Randolph Scott?”

“Yup.”

“Shacked up in Hollywood?”

“Yup.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Up to you.”

“What about John Wayne?”

“What about him?”

“Well that would be perfect, if he were gay...”

“Nope. Just an asshole... but J. Edgar Hoover is a cross dresser...”

“Bullshit.”

“Believe it or don’t.”

So why wasn’t I concerned, upset, worried that people would think I was queer too? I’m not sure. I mean I know it must have been the whole hippie, Sixties, open your mind stuff, but I don’t remember anything specific that would have challenged the Pasco in me. I don’t think it was anything that happened studying psychology in university – I think they were still treating homosexuality as a disease back then.

I do remember how surprised I was when I realized how bigoted I had been. The same thing happened with racism and sexism. Sometimes you don’t realize it’s there until you start getting rid of it, and then you think, “What the fuck!”

Getting to know John and Ron was the beginning of an awareness that eventually became Gay Liberation. And in the same way that I experienced Women’s Liberation as a personal liberation for me too, Gay Liberation was kind

of a liberation for “us” as well as “them”: I didn’t have to worry about being John Wayne, didn’t have to worry if people thought I was a queer, didn’t have to worry about not fitting in. It wasn’t me that was fucked up – it was the world around me. The Fifties and the early Sixties (the pre-Sixties) were a period of great conformity. Fitting in was the most important thing in the world, and the standards were so unnatural that it was almost impossible to fit in, even if you were a white, middle-class, male, athletic heterosexual – god help you if you were Black, female, queer, or just not with the program. That was the great thing about the Sixties that united us across so many barriers: it was this giant FUCK YOU to all the rules that had been shoved down our throats, that we had swallowed without even realizing it, and that were choking us almost to death.

Gay Liberation was kind of the ultimate FUCK YOU, because being queer was the ultimate taboo. There were rules about what kind of Black or what kind of female you had to be, but the only rule about queers was DON’T BE ONE.

So it was a kick in the stomach when – after I’d been in the Party for about a year – a new line came down from the Central Committee that homosexuality was “bourgeois decadence” and that “active” homosexuals could not be members of the organization.

I think almost everyone in the Seattle branch was stunned and appalled when this came down. I know there was a lot of struggle about it. It didn’t happen at big meetings where we all argued together. It happened in each of our individual collectives. Outside of the collectives there was no debate, because we were organized *a lá* democratic centralism. That meant we were free – strongly encouraged, in fact – to express an opinion and “fight for line” inside the collective, but outside we were obliged to defend the Party line. Democratic

centralism was what we called “a unity of opposites”. You couldn’t have one without the other. If nothing was ever decided and acted upon in a unified way, it didn’t make any difference how much democratic discussion took place: nobody would have a real voice. On the other hand, the organization had to learn from the experience of its members and to correct its inevitable mistakes, so democracy was essential too.

That was the theory, and on the local level it worked in a pretty visible way. We did make mistakes, the leadership was criticized, and policies were changed – in fact, leadership was changed pretty regularly. We were connected to popular struggles – often we were leading them – and as new people got involved in the struggle, we worked on recruiting them into the Party and promoting them into leadership positions as fast as they were able to take on the responsibility.

Conversely, everybody’s performance was reviewed regularly in “criticism/self criticism” sessions, and those who were making mistakes and not learning from them fast enough – or just getting tired – were moved aside to make room for new people with enthusiasm and good ideas.

If this sounds a bit cut-throat, it wasn’t. The whole atmosphere was very supportive – although riven with nosiness and gossip too. We all tried to help each other “use our strengths to overcome our weaknesses”, as it said in Mao’s *Red Book*. In some ways the Party was like a giant therapy session, but saved from navel gazing because all the “therapy” was aimed at changing the world, not just making yourself a more groovy person.

The Party was very much a product of the Sixties, but it was made up of people who had started reading Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao to figure out how to kill the beast. Homosexuality was right in the crossfire of these two influences.

China, Stalinist Russia, the traditional labor movement were all pretty down on queers, while the Sixties gave birth to Gay Liberation as a movement.

So we fought it out in Seattle for almost a year. We argued about it in the Central Committee. We argued about it inside each of the collectives. At the same time, we argued about it with people outside the Party, but that was different, because in those arguments we all had to take the same side. We had to defend the Party line: homosexuality is bourgeois decadence.

Looking back on it now (only just now as I'm writing this – amazing), it occurs to me that the whole line on queers came down differently than other decisions. Often decisions were made at the top, in the National Central Committee, and then came down to us for discussion and implementation. But these decisions were usually based on summarizing ongoing work or on discussions that had already taken place throughout the organization. The line on homosexuality was a bolt out of the blue.

Here is where I should explain and defend at least the plausibility of the Party line. It's been close to ten years since I quit believing it, but I believed and defended it for nearly thirty years – so this should come easy. But it doesn't.

Here are the main points that were made:

1. The Party would work and unite with lesbians and homosexuals in all progressive struggles.
2. The Party would oppose gay bashing and any form of discrimination against gays in employment or any other aspect of society.

But...

3. Practicing homosexuals and lesbians could not be members of the Party.

Because...

4. Homosexuality and lesbianism are a form of bourgeois decadence.

5. Homosexuality and lesbianism cannot be understood separated from the overall context of class society and the oppression of women. There is an aspect of male supremacy built into homosexual culture. Lesbianism, as a reaction to male supremacy, is more understandable, but it is a reaction in the direction of separatism, rather than unity and struggle.

When I first read the position paper, I couldn't believe it. I thought there must be some mistake. I argued against it from the start.

But none of us wanted to secede from the Party and start a new organization – and that was pretty much the only other choice, because the decision had already been made. We all wanted so badly for the Party to work, to stay united, to grow, to be able to have a real impact. The anti-war movement that had peaked at such a powerful level in 1970-71 was now receding. If we hoped to really change the world, to put an end to imperialism, we had to achieve a mass base in the working class. For us, the Party was the only game in town. And so, the struggle against the line on homosexuality was in many ways more of a struggle to convince ourselves that the line was right after all.

Annie and Shannon and the rest of their feminist friends went through a similar process. When they discovered the Party's position on homosexuality, they were at first outraged. But a lot of it resonated with them. They felt a strong current of misogyny in some parts of gay culture, although as they were the first to point out, there was plenty of misogyny in heterosexual male culture. Also, they had broken with the separatist wing of the women's movement, including elements of radical lesbianism. They believed that Women's Liberation had to be part of an overall fight against every aspect of imperialism. But most of all, like

those of us inside the Party, they were hungry for an organization that had a real chance of making revolution.

Ironically, as they were won over to the line, they became its strongest and most effective advocates. Or perhaps not so ironically – as I remember, the last person inside the Party to be won over to the line, the only person who held out longer than me, became so strongly convinced of its correctness that even now, years after the Party itself has made a self criticism and repudiated the line, he's still not entirely convinced it was wrong.

Through all the fuzziness brought on by the passage of time, I do remember the exact point when I turned the corner and began to accept the line. It happened at a regional central committee meeting. The rest of the central committee was united in supporting the line by then, but the youngest – and possibly the brightest – member of the central committee asked me a question.

“Fred, do you think the class character of a homosexual relationship is positive or negative?”

It seemed like a real question, like he hadn't made up his mind entirely and was trying to get some insight into my position. If I were to answer that now, I would say that any loving relationship has a positive class character. Back then I said, “I don't think it's either positive or negative. It just is.”

He seemed to consider this for a moment, and then shook his head. “No, I can't buy that. I think everything in class society has a class character. If it isn't positive, it's negative.”

Then he went on to make what for him – and me – at the time, was the crushing point. “And the main thing,” he said, “the thing that really convinces me, is that China has the same position, that homosexuality is bourgeois decadence.”

Game, set and match.

It shouldn't have been. In theory, we believed that it was important to be critical of everything and everyone, including the big five – Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao – but in practice, to make a major criticism of any of them was a very big deal indeed.

So I convinced myself.

And the conviction was totally intertwined with my loyalty to the revolutions in Russia and China – not an uncritical loyalty, but not critical enough. Having convinced myself, I clung to the line long after I had left the Party. I defended it with the same stubborn loyalty that I defended Stalin as a leader, who – though he had made some serious mistakes – had still played a progressive role in the world revolution. In both cases, the more hostility the line provoked, the more stubborn my defence.

Fast forward a few years...

I had dropped out of the Party and was back in Pasco. Dad had died and I'd moved back there to stay with my little brother. While I was stuck there with time on my hands, I started acting in the Community Theatre. I loved it – and it spurred me to start writing plays. I had just finished a first draft of a first play when I met a playwright – call him Brad – who had come back from New York to visit family and friends in his home town.

His main claim to fame as a playwright was that he had been subpoenaed by The House Committee on Un-American Activities (of McCarthy witch hunt fame). Brad did himself proud at the Committee hearings. He and his friends showed up prepared to turn the event into a New York picnic. They filled the galleries and laughed and cheered while Brad faced down the Committee. It was a

short picnic though. A few minutes into the hearing, the Committee figured out that they had mixed Brad up with another more famous playwright who had the same last name. They were forced to apologize, and Brad returned to New York in triumph.

Brad was a real playwright with several off-Broadway productions to his credit. Back in his hometown for the first time since his New York successes, he gave a talk on playwriting at the local theatre group. I was there in the audience with my new play, a Communist Broadway musical about my days in the anti-war movement.

Brad agreed to read it. He liked it – most of it. He had a big criticism of one part.

“I think the scene in the courtroom where the judge and the prosecuting attorney dance cheek to cheek is homophobic.”

“I’m just trying to show the collusion between them,” I said.

“But you’re using homosexuality as a put-down. There’s nothing wrong with being a queer.”

Brad was gay. I knew that when I gave him the script. He had already told us this. It was why he had left for New York the day after he graduated from high school. His best friend had been gay too, and lived through hell because of it. As I said before, there aren’t many trees in Eastern Washington, but there are plenty of guns. Two weeks before graduation, Brad’s friend swallowed a shotgun barrel and blew off the back of his head. Brad was the one who found him.

I explained my theory about homosexuality being bourgeois decadence to him. He wasn’t impressed. I assured him that I was against the persecution of homosexuals. I said it was terrible what had happened to his friend, that I hated it,

which was true – I did. I could imagine what it must have been like, the bullying, the fear, the barnyard mentality where the weakest chicken is pecked to death by the rest of the flock. But I wouldn't change my views about homosexuality. And I wouldn't change that scene in the play.

Brad told me it would be an easy thing to change. All I had to do was make the judge or the prosecuting attorney female. It would make the point stronger then, because the focus would be on the collusion itself, not on the kind of sexuality involved. He was right. But I wouldn't change it.

Fast forward a few years...

I'm back in Seattle, but I'll be leaving for Berlin in a couple months. The Gay Pride march has been split into two. A group of more conservative homosexuals have organized a separate march. They didn't like having gay pride connected to a grab bag of other leftist causes. They also didn't like being "bossed around by a bunch of radical lesbians."

The word *schadenfreude* was invented for situations like this. I take the split as dramatic vindication for the line that homosexuality is bourgeois decadence. The organizers of the separate march are showing their true colors. Of course, every other movement has splits and divisions between more and less progressive elements, but I want to believe this split is of a different order.

Fast forward about a decade and a half. I am living in London now, and I've travelled all over the northern hemisphere. I'm still "true" to my convictions. No matter how marginalized I become, no matter how much ridicule it inspires, I stick to my line that homosexuality is bourgeois decadence. I don't volunteer it. And when it comes up, I emphasize my opposition to any discrimination against lesbians and homosexuals. But I don't abandon it just because it's unpopular.

Then one day, I do abandon it. Just like that. No new arguments. No earth shaking revelations. I just stop.

What happened? Nothing that was related especially to homosexuality in particular or sexuality in general. I had just reached one of those moments where the mental walls came down and I questioned everything I believed in.

Communism in Russia and China had long since been defeated, but for a long time, I didn't ask myself the obvious questions: Is any kind of a revolution still possible? What kind? Who will make it? And the fundamental question, why did the last great wave of revolutions, which at one time had embraced almost half the world's population, fail so completely.

Once I opened my mind to real questioning, I began to question everything. Some things I believed in – most things, really – withstood the assault. But the very first thing to fall was all the crap about homosexuality and bourgeois decadence. It was easy – I felt the weight on my shoulders and just shucked it off. For all those years, I had never dealt with the obvious contradiction in my position: if homosexuality was bourgeois decadence, why was I so opposed to any form of discrimination against it? The answer was obvious – I knew the whole line was unjust. I had so many friends, even close relatives, who were gay, and I knew the bigotry aimed against them was the same kind of evil shit as the bigotry aimed against women, Blacks, Mexicans... name it.

The thing I most believed in, still believe in, is internationalism – in the broad sense, not just referring to equality between nationalities, but between all peoples. The most inspiring words in all the communist literature I read came from Lenin's *What Is to Be Done*, where he said that for a revolution to happen, the working class must feel all oppression as if it were their own; they must fight against every

form of discrimination as if it were being directed at them personally. I had not been true to this.

I had lost touch with the Party by then, but years later, when I went back to Seattle, I discovered they had long since abandoned their line on homosexuality and had made a self-criticism about it. I'm not sure, but I think they may have changed their line a few years before I did.

Many on the Left felt the Party's self-criticism didn't go far enough. They argued that the roots of homophobia must have run deeply in the Party for it to cling to this prejudice for so long. I don't want to downplay the importance of this question, but for me, what was more disturbing is that on the levels that I worked, this wasn't the case at all. With a few exceptions everybody in the Seattle area reacted with dismay when this line first came down. Most fought against it. Many fought bitterly and for a long time. But in the end, we convinced ourselves. And once convinced, we defended it with the same stubborn resistance that we defended the embassy takeover in Iran and other unpopular but totally righteous causes.

Why?

I've already suggested that it was a question of misplaced loyalty – loyalty to the Party, to the revolution in China, basically loyalty to people and organization rather than loyalty to the struggle for a true revolutionary line. Over the years, I've come to realize what a powerful and dangerous force loyalty can be. It is the lifeblood of a revolution, almost literally so when the revolutionary party – as is

so often the case – is fighting for its survival. On a broader scale, it's what makes human society possible, and to a large extent, it's what makes life worth living. But it is also a terrible danger. The flip side of loyalty to your own tribe is enmity to the outsider.

The whole project of Communist internationalism is to broaden tribal loyalty to include, first, the world-wide proletariat, second, a united front of all the oppressed – “the wretched of the earth” – and finally, the whole human race as it is transformed into a classless society. Not that all contradictions would disappear – that's impossible – but we ought at least to be able to stop slaughtering each other. We ought to be able to consciously plan the kind of society we want to live in.

The apostles of capitalism say this isn't possible. We're too greedy, too bureaucratic, too sinful... The best we can do is to rely on “the wisdom of the market”, let competition sort things out for us. I didn't want to end this book talking about the Party and homosexuality because it seems to support this argument. It's an example where we behaved like sheep.

But I think that's always going to be a danger as long as we're still human. There's always going to be a contradiction between co-operation and competition, between loyalty to the tribe and daring to go against the tide. There is no easy solution to this contradiction, no organizational formula that will guarantee the right balance is struck. It's a battle that will have to be fought and won over and over again. I think we got it right – most of the time – but in upholding the Party line on homosexuality, we spent thirty years proving how easy it can be to get it wrong. It doesn't have to be that way. We can learn from our mistakes. We have to.

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a critical essay

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Introduction

They say baptism imprints an indelible mark on your soul. Not true, of course, it is just a trickle of water over your forehead, usually when you're too young to do anything about it. But being raised a Catholic definitely marks you for life. A friend of a friend who is a practising psychiatrist in Seattle says almost all her business comes from Jews, Catholics, and Microsoft employees. I know I will never escape Catholicism, the good, the bad and the ugly – but its hold is weakened by the fact that its foundations are manifestly not true: no god, no devil, no heaven, no hell, just this world and what we make of it – for good or ill.

Another friend of mine told me of a book he read about people who had been Communists in the Thirties and Forties. The book was written in the Sixties, and by then many of these people had dropped out; some had even become renegades and great anti-communist crusaders. But they all had one thing in common: they looked back on their Communist days as by far the most important time in their life, the time that shaped them, that made them what they were – for good or ill.

That's the way it was for me, living through the Sixties and moving from anti-war protests to revolution and then to communism. The experience changed me profoundly. And even though I have long since become a dropout, the experience has stayed with me in ways that are very different from the traces of Catholicism left over from my earlier life.

One reason for this is obvious. God, heaven, the devil and hell may have faded back into the realm of mythology, but Capitalism is still here. All the contradictions that pulled me into the revolutionary movement are still here, only

now more intense than ever. I still keep getting drawn back into things. The only way to be a complete dropout is to die – or become a monster.

The other reason is more personal. I have found that Communism as a philosophy of life – as a world outlook and a way of living and working in the world – addresses my deepest questions and challenges my highest aspirations. I'm talking specifically here about the philosophy of dialectical materialism and the Communist method of work that has come to be known – since Mao – as “the mass line”. However, this is hardly a popular view nowadays, where the world seems to be marching backwards into a new age of religion and superstition, where the lessons of the great liberation struggles of the twentieth century are dismissed with an ironic smile – or sneered at as the ravings of delusional cultists.

It is impossible not to be affected by these new Dark Ages.

When I first started to write this book, my original conception – I realize now – was entirely defensive. The working title was *Team Spirit*. I thought it would be about co-operation and altruism, and about how this, the source of so much good in the world, was also a source of great evil – wars, for an easy example, are impossible without altruism and co-operation. I thought the novel would take a close look at how loyalty to the Party and revolution had led me to convince myself of things that I didn't really believe in. But artistic projects seldom go neatly along pre-planned routes, and I found that the novel I was writing was actually a love story about the Party I had long since dropped out of but still felt tied to in so many ways.

This is the advantage of a novel – or any other artistic enterprise – as a method of investigation. Because you must follow the logic of the materials rather than simply impose your front-brain preconceptions, it can lead you in surprising

directions. Often you arrive at some totally unexpected destination, and once there, great new vistas are opened up.

Novels have their limitations, though. Anything that interrupts the narrative flow must be indulged in only with great caution. The level of caution necessary varies greatly, depending on the type of novel it is. Because I conceived of this work as a novel of ideas, I expected that I would be able to give myself great leeway to discuss those ideas. But in experiment after experiment, perhaps because the ideas went so against the grain of the times, I found that I had to either describe events operationally or write chapter-length essays on the political and philosophical issues involved. There was no in-between that could keep the narrative drive and still consider the issues in a way that didn't seem naive and superficial. That's where this critical essay comes in. Here I hope to do three things that could not be done in the novel.

My first objective is to examine the philosophy of dialectical materialism which played such a dominant role in the lives of all those in and around the Party. As will be manifest, I am writing in the tradition that calls itself Scientific Marxism and traces its lineage from Marx and Engels through Lenin, Stalin and Mao. I will refer to this as Scientific Marxism – or Maoism for short. To be clear on this point, I am not asserting that there is something called “Maoism” that is fundamentally different from “Marxism”. Rather, I am asserting a particular interpretation of Marxism that is inextricably tied to the theory and practice of Communist revolution.

In the early Seventies in Seattle, I attended a lecture by William Hinton, the author of *Fanshen*. He had just returned from another investigation in China, and he told of discussing Mao's *Four Essays in Philosophy* with villagers in a remote

sector of Mongolian China. He told us, “China is raising a nation of philosophers.” At the time, we understood him perfectly. All of our political work – in schools, trade unions, welfare offices, everywhere – was planned out with constant reference to those same *Four Essays* and all the other basic works of Marxist philosophy.

However, our study of philosophy, intense as it was, confined itself almost exclusively to the Marxist classics. There is a long history of antipathy between Scientific Marxism and academic Marxism. The academic world tends to regard with derision the claim that there could ever be such a thing as a “science” of revolution, and Mao, in particular, is seldom treated as a serious thinker. In fact, he is seldom treated at all.¹ It baffled us how academic philosophers who claimed to be Marxist and so, presumably, subscribed to the Marxist maxim “Philosophers have hitherto attempted to interpret the world, the point however is to change it”... how they could so comprehensively ignore the philosophical thinking of someone who had radically changed the world for one quarter of the human race.

Our attitude, on the other hand, could be summed up with the jibe, “Philosophers have hitherto attempted to interpret the world; the point, however, is to be well-published and get tenure.” I think this attitude impoverished our thinking and was often just an excuse for intellectual laziness, but there was also a serious theoretical logic to it. From Marx to Mao, Scientific Marxists have insisted that Marxism, as the science of revolution, could be successfully studied only if it were linked to the practice of making revolution. Mao puts it this way:

¹ The erasure continues to the present, even in places where you might not expect it. “The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, for example, managed 19 index references to hybridity (including hybrid poetics), and only four to Marx (no Mao, only 1 Lenin). (Hutnyk 2003)

As the arrow is to the target, so is Marxism-Leninism to the Chinese revolution. Some comrades, however, are “shooting without a target”, shooting at random, and such people are liable to harm the revolution. Others merely stroke the arrow fondly, exclaiming, “What a fine arrow! What a fine arrow!”, but never want to shoot it. These people are only connoisseurs of curios and have virtually nothing to do with the revolution. (Mao 1969, III, 11)

The arrow metaphor is used here to assert the necessity of theory to guide revolutionary action but also to assert that theory is useless if it is not linked to practice. On the other hand, perhaps it could be useful, just as a thought experiment, to separate the archer from the arrow maker. Perhaps there is some use to playing with ideas just for the fun of it. If you believe six impossible things before breakfast, maybe by lunch time one or two of them might turn out to be possible after all.

Academic philosophy, looked at in this way, would be a form of play, an art – not expected to produce anything useful, but consequently free to be useful in unexpected ways. When I returned to university study after many years, the entire Postmodern project struck me in this way. A phrase of Julia Kristeva’s seemed to me to sum up what was most useful in Postmodernism: “not to renounce theoretical reason but to compel it to increase its power by giving it an object beyond its limits” (1980, p. 146).

I was also struck by how much of Postmodernism was a partial recapitulation of Maoist dialectics, although in the English art school version which I first confronted, the connection was entirely unconscious.

It was not always so. As Robert Young points out in *White Mythologies*:

Accounts of post-structuralism consistently underemphasize the importance of Maoism in the Paris of the 1960s and 1970s, the breadth and depth of its influence, the extent to which French Sinophilia contributed to the development of critical perspectives on Western culture and generated interest in forms of alterity.” (2004, p. 16)

When I discovered Nietzsche, it seemed like the last piece of a puzzle had fallen into place. In the post-revolutionary climate of the mid-Seventies and beyond – where too close an association with Marxism might be detrimental to your career, and to be identified as any kind of a Maoist, a fast ticket to academic oblivion – Nietzsche could be invaluable as a Marxism substitute. Nietzsche thinks in dynamic opposites in a manner that has much in common with Marxist dialectics.

Consider the following table:

Nietzsche as a Dialectical Materialist

| Nietzsche | Marx and Engels |
|--|--|
| [Referring to Heraclitus, the first philosopher of dialectics in the Western tradition...] Affirmation of transitoriness and destruction, the decisive element in a Dionysian philosophy, affirmation of | This primitive, naïve but intrinsically correct conception of the world is that of ancient Greek philosophy, and was first clearly formulated by Heraclitus: everything is |

antithesis and war, becoming with a radical rejection even of the concept “being” – in this I must in any event recognize what is most closely related to me of anything that has been thought hitherto. (Nietzsche 1992, p. 51)

...for Nietzsche the origins of a phenomenon are always to be found in what it is not, what it has negated in order to become what it is. [basic dialectics – me] (Caygill 1993, p. 110)

and also is not, for everything is *in flux*, is constantly changing, constantly coming into being and passing away. (Engels 1976a, p. 24)

To the metaphysician, things and their mental images, ideas, are isolated, to be considered one after the other and apart from each other, fixed, rigid objects of investigation given once for all. He thinks in absolutely unmediated antitheses. His communication is “yea, yea; nay, nay; for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.” For him a thing either exists or does not exist; a thing cannot at the same time be itself and something else. Positive and negative absolutely exclude one another; cause and effect stand in a rigid antithesis one to the other.

At first sight this way of thinking seems to us most plausible because it is that of so-called sound common sense. Yet sound common sense, respectable

| | |
|--|--|
| | <p>fellow that he is in the homely realm of his own four walls, has very wonderful adventures directly he ventures out into the wide world of research. The metaphysical mode of thought, justifiable and even necessary as it is in a number of domains whose extent varies according to the nature of the object, invariably bumps into a limit sooner or later, beyond which it becomes one-sided, restricted, abstract, lost in insoluble contradictions, because in the presence of individual things it forgets their connections; because in the presence of their existence it forgets their coming into being and passing away; because in their state of rest it forgets their motion. It cannot see the forest for the trees. (Engels 1976a, p. 26)</p> |
| <p>The thing itself, to say it again, the concept “thing” is merely a reflection of the belief in the ego as cause. (Nietzsche 1968b, p. 50)</p> | <p>The great basic thought that the world is to be comprehended not as a complex of ready-made <i>things</i> but as a complex of <i>processes</i>, in which</p> |

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>“Thingness has only been invented by us owing to the requirements of logic.” (Nietzsche 1968a, p. 558)</p> | <p>apparently stable things no less than the concepts, their mental reflections in our heads, go through an uninterrupted change of coming into being and passing away... (Engels 1976b, p. 41)</p> |
| <p>For Nietzsche does not associate science with the attainment of truth but with the refusal to accept the finality of any alleged “truth”... (Watt 1993, p. 127)</p> | <p>If, however, investigation always proceeds from this standpoint, the demand for final solutions and eternal truths ceases once and for all; we are always conscious of the necessarily limited nature of all knowledge gained, of its being conditioned by the circumstances in which it was gained. (Engels 1976b, pp. 41, 42)</p> |
| <p>The grounds upon which “this” world has been designated as apparent establish rather its reality – another kind of reality is absolutely undemonstrable. (Nietzsche 1968b, p. 39)</p> | <p>The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man [sic] must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-sideness of his [sic] thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question. (Marx, in Engels</p> |

| | |
|---|---|
| | 1976b, p. 61) |
| We possess scientific knowledge today to precisely the extent that we have decided to accept the evidence of the senses... (Nietzsche 1968b, p. 36) | According to his [Francis Bacon's] teaching, the senses are infallible and are the source of all knowledge. (Marx 1972, p. 149) |

One obvious objection that can be made to this comparison is that Nietzsche is a complex and contradictory writer and I have been very selective in my choice of quotes. This is undoubtedly true, but I think it is nevertheless fair to say that dialectics plays a substantial role in Nietzsche's methodology and the tools are there to be picked up on and used in postmodern discourse.

Another objection, possibly not so obvious but in my view more substantial, is that I have cheated in one of the Engels quotes. I excluded a very important clause. The quote should read like this (I have put the excluded part in italics):

...in which the things apparently stable no less than their mind images in our heads, the concepts, go through an uninterrupted change of coming into being and passing away, *in which, through all the seeming contingency and in spite of all temporary retrogression, a progressive development finally asserts itself...* (Engels 1976b, p. 41)

This faith in historical progress – so much a part of twentieth-century thinking and an essential element of Hegel's idealism – is a strong presence in early

Marxism.² But faith in historical progress is just that – faith. It is not compatible with the claim of Marxism to be a science. The process of stripping Marxist dialectics of its idealist Hegelian hangovers has been an ongoing one in Scientific Marxism, from Marx and Engels through Mao.

Academic Marxism, on the other hand, has moved in various conflicting directions on this issue, and Postmodernism's concept of dialectics has been equally peripatetic. Georg Lukács, in his very influential *History and Class Consciousness*, goes so far as to maintain that “the category of totality, the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts is the essence of the [dialectical] method” (p. 27). This is a fair comment on the dialectical method, if you are talking about Hegel's dialectics. It becomes more problematic if you're talking about Marx and Engels, and it flat out contradicts the Maoist conception of dialectics, where totality is always divided into two, and struggle and disjunction are primary over balance and unity.

Louis Althusser's attack on Hegelian dialectics and its academic Marxist variations was informed by Mao's writing, and Julia Kristeva's first major work, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), also attacks the Hegelian concept of totality while referencing Mao's *On Practice* and *On Contradiction*. On the other hand, most Postmodern writers tend to associate dialectics with the Hegelian version where opposites come together in the third term – the negation of the negation – where both opposed terms are raised to a higher level, partially preserved and partially destroyed.

A particularly clear example of this is a discussion by Roland Barthes on the paradoxical nature of language that begins, “It is because language is not

² For a more detailed critique of this, see (Althusser 2006, pp.36-39)

dialectical (does not allow the third term...) that discourse (discursivity) moves, in its historical impetus, by *clashes*" (1977, pp. 199, 200). He then continues with a very dialectical—but not Hegelian—history of language theory, which he describes as a spiral movement produced by the clash of opposites—not a bad description of Marxist dialectics – but not dialectical at all in Barthes' view.

Jacques Derrida rejects Hegel's third term as "onto-theological" and identifies his own concept of *différance* as akin to Hegelian dialectics minus the third term:

I have attempted to distinguish *différance* (whose *a* marks, among other things, its productive and conflictual characteristics) from Hegelian difference, and have done so precisely at the point at which Hegel in the greater *Logic*, determines difference as contradiction only in order to resolve it, to interiorize it, to lift it up (according to the syllogistic process of speculative dialectics) into the self-presence of an onto-theological or onto-teleological synthesis. (2004, p. 40)

But Derrida conceives his criticism of Hegel as a criticism of dialectics in general – not as a more dialectical critique of Hegel's idealism. Due to these and similar views on the nature of dialectics, Nietzsche's profound influence on Postmodernism does not happen under the banner of dialectics – because there is no third term in Nietzsche's dialectics, no all-encompassing totality, no teleology, just the dynamic clash of opposites. But it is just this stripping away of teleology and the concept of the negation of the negation associated with it that defines Mao's contribution to the development of Marxist dialectics. In this respect, Nietzsche was even closer to Mao than to Marxist dialectics in general.

So my second objective in writing this essay is to explore this difference in Mao's conception of dialectics compared to that of earlier Scientific Marxism and of Engels in particular. I will argue that although Mao was an orthodox Scientific Marxist, he also, just as Lenin before him, further developed Marxism in the course of applying it to the particular conditions of his own historical time and place. I will argue that in this philosophical advance, Mao is merely completing work that was begun by Lenin. [It is interesting to note that when Lenin, in his essay, *Karl Marx*, used the same Engels quote that I used above, he cut out the same part that I did (1967, p. 11).]

My third objective for the essay is to explore some key political issues in the context of the time in which the novel is set. My objective is not to make definitive statements about these issues but to show how we used Maoist dialectics to analyze problems and to show some of the thinking behind the actions described in the novel. I haven't attempted to be systematic in the presentation of these ideas, or to explain them fully, or to defend them. For the most part, I've used them as illustrations of the philosophical points in the essay rather than the reverse. To return to an earlier metaphor, I've pretty much stuck to playing with the arrow, only occasionally shooting it at the target and even then mostly just to illustrate some of the arrow's excellent aerodynamic qualities.

My reasons for this are partly practical: all of the major political issues are highly contested and to address them fully and competently would require considerably more space than is available in the entire essay. But there is a more basic reason: I think the philosophical issues give a deeper insight into the character of the people I've written about. Some of the details are highly technical, but they lead step by step into a world outlook and a method of work

that the characters believed to be – at its best – both ruthlessly practical and ethically compelling.

There are, however, two topical issues that I feel must be mentioned here. The first is the Vietnam War – the Indochinese/U.S. War would be more accurate. This war and the movement against it had a profound effect on the political climate of the United States. Most of us started the Sixties with a solid belief in “truth, justice and the American way”, a phrase from the original Superman TV show that can only be used with irony now. By the end of the decade, very many of us saw the United States as the enemy – not just wrong or misguided, but an empire based on an economic system that could only expand or be destroyed. I won’t try to prove the correctness of this thesis here, but its currency at the time is inarguable. One of the reasons for the immense popularity of the first *Star Wars* movie – to pick an easy example – was that many of us identified Darth Vader with Nixon’s *éminence grise*, Henry Kissinger.

The second issue I need to mention is the Cultural Revolution in China. The view of the Cultural Revolution held by the characters in the novel is so wildly at variance with the dominant discourse in both modern-day China and in the West that it has to be addressed at least in outline. The dominant judgment is well known: it was a period of mass insanity and mass murder.

The Maoist view is that the Cultural Revolution was the high point of a revolution that brought China out of the dark ages and created a state and an economy run by and for the masses of workers and peasants. But socialism in China was very much a work in progress. There were those in the Party who wanted to continue the Socialist Revolution and those, like Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shao-ch’i, who wanted to create a strong capitalist economy. The Cultural

Revolution was a battle fought to see which side would prevail. Despite Mao's prestige, the "capitalist roaders" held the dominant positions in both the Party and the Army, and they used those positions ruthlessly to suppress the revolutionary movement that had, under Mao's leadership, risen up against them. The battle was bloody and protracted, and it was not until Mao died that the capitalist roaders were able to gain the decisive advantage.

The result has been very fast economic development in the coastal cities and an increasingly wealthy middle class, combined with the spectacular growth of economic inequality, the dismantling of free education and healthcare for the peasants and most of the working class, the loss of access to clean air and clean water, massacres like the one in Tiananmen Square, and the ruthless suppression of Tibetan people.

I realise this account must seem to most people like madness on the level of denying the Holocaust, and it has left me with a problem that is unsolvable within the scope of this book. On the one hand, how can I expect anyone to take seriously anything in this account of Maoist philosophy unless they are at least willing to suspend disbelief on the question of the Cultural Revolution? On the other hand, to deal systematically with such a massive disconnect would take at least an entire book, or more realistically, a series of books – and even then, so little of what we believe is determined solely by the evidence presented in documents... Nevertheless, for any who wish to pursue the matter, there is a growing literature that presents a position contrary to the dominant discourse.³

³ For a view of the early stages of the Chinese Revolution, both before and after seizing power, see Hinton (1997); Myrdal (1975); and Snow (1972). For a detailed and well documented analysis of what really happened in the *Great Leap Forward* and a review of the level of scholarship that allows any charge, no matter how undocumented, to be taken seriously and repeated endlessly, see Ball (2006). For some statistics from a Nobel laureate on China's achievements in health care, life expectancy, infant mortality and literacy, see Sen (2005). For

One final point: I am writing at a time when the great revolutions of the last century have been defeated. Clearly, even for those who supported these revolutions – especially for them – now is a time for reflection and reassessment; now is the time to sum up the failures and the accomplishments and to use this new summation to point the way forward. I have not tried to do this here. Rather, for the most part I have confined myself to an attempt to give an accurate picture of the past: what we did and what we thought.

I think of both the novel and this essay as comprising a fictional documentary. I see so little in the mass media and in the histories of those times that I recognize as a fair and honest account of the people I knew and the world we lived in. Clearly, I am giving an account from the inside – the world I knew first hand – but I think it contributes to the broader picture of the last century. We were a part of the hundreds of millions of people who gave themselves heart and soul to the struggle for revolutionary change – and not just with great heart and great gullibility, like Boxer, the draft horse in *Animal Farm*, but with great intelligence and long sleepless nights of study and thought and argument. A terrible price was paid, but wonderful things were accomplished. Profound lessons were learned. They must not be forgotten.

two sympathetic – but conflicting – accounts of the process of the Cultural Revolution and how it was defeated, see Badiou (2005b); and Lotta (1978). For critical accounts of the restoration of capitalism, the impoverishment of the masses – and an account of the struggle going on inside China to tell the true story in unofficial sources, such as the online media, see Gao (2008); and Hinton (1990). For an account of the lives of ordinary Chinese women during the Cultural Revolution that is radically different from the “victim literature” that has streamed out of China, and for an account of the campaign inside China initiated by Deng Xiaoping to “negate the Cultural Revolution” by creating “victim literature”, see Zheng (2006); and Zhong (2001).

Dialectical Materialism

Marxism is often described as a form of economic determinism. Mao is then considered to have deviated from Marxism in the direction of voluntarism. Sometimes this criticism is made of Lenin, as well. Occasionally – and perhaps paradoxically – it is made of Marx and Engels too, in the sense that they are charged with promoting a form of political activism that is in direct contradiction to the economic determinism of their overall system (Knight 1997, pp. 84, 85, 108, 109). This last criticism has a grain of truth – there is a contradiction between determinism and activism. However, I will argue that there is no logical contradiction, but rather a dynamic tension between these two aspects of Scientific Marxism – a unity of opposites.

In the interpretation that I will defend, the ultimate goal of communism is a planet where the human race is in conscious control of its destiny, rather than being driven willy-nilly by socio-economic forces that are not understood and that operate with the same impersonal power as a hurricane or a sunrise. This is a relative goal, with levels of causality always operating on us beyond those we already understand and are able to manipulate. This means we can never be absolutely free, but we can continually push back the barriers and reach for higher consciousness and greater freedom.

Such an enterprise is built on science understood as the cumulative unravelling of causal interconnections in the universe that we are a part of. All of the terms in the above sentence are problematic: “causality”, “the universe” and “us”. The role of philosophy is to constantly examine how we use these terms, exposing the hidden assumptions and enabling us to bring the scientific process

itself under the scrutiny of the scientific process. In order to do this, philosophy must perform the same operation on itself.

It follows from all this that philosophy is absolutely central to the communist enterprise. And clearly this is shown in practice. Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao all refer constantly to the basic principles of Marxist philosophy and apply them to solve the problems of revolutionary practice.

Mao puts it this way:

There are a number of subjects in Marxism: Marxist philosophy, Marxist economics, Marxist socialism – the theory of class struggle; but the basic thing is Marxist philosophy. Unless this thing is studied and understood, we will not have a common language or a common method among us; we could argue back and forth, but things still would not be clear. But if we have dialectical materialist thought, we will save ourselves a lot of trouble and commit many fewer mistakes. (1986, I, 533)

It also follows that Marxist philosophy must contain its opposite; it must be both a philosophy and an anti-philosophy. That is to say, it must constantly examine its own process and assumptions in the light of history and scientific theory and practice, stripping away parts of itself that turn out to be mystifications based on an earlier ignorance. The philosopher of science Paul Churchland describes the relationship between philosophy and science in the following way:

What we call a philosophical problem is a problem that's so far from scientific solution that no self-respecting scientist will touch it! And so

they throw it over to philosophy and say, here, *you* worry about it! And a successful philosopher is someone who manages to bring some order or insight inside the area, sufficient order that you can then start asking empirical questions – you can start proposing experiments... (2007, p. 228)

One side of this process is the development of science. As Churchland points out, physics used to be part of the job philosophers did. One could say that the other side of the process is the retreat of philosophy from areas where it is no longer needed – but this makes the process seem clear and straightforward, which it is not. It would probably be more accurate to say, no longer needed in the same way. New questions arise out of the ashes of the old. Consequently, Marxist philosophy understands itself as a battleground, fighting the same battles over and over again, but on ever higher levels. The two arenas for the battle are the materialist theory of knowledge and the dialectical theory of the contradictory nature of being.

Mao puts it this way:

In philosophy, materialism and idealism are a unity of opposites and struggle with each other. Two other things, dialectics and metaphysics, are also a unity of opposites that struggle against each other. Whenever philosophy is discussed, these two pairs [of contradictions] cannot be avoided... This struggle will continue forever and will move one step forward at each stage. (1986, I, 253)

I will first describe the basics of materialist dialectics in its stripped down Maoist form. Then I will look at some of the key ideas that have been stripped away to arrive at the current Maoist understanding of dialectics.

Maoist materialist dialectics could be summed up briefly in two opposing statements:

1. All things are one.
2. One divides into two.

All Things Are One

The above statement is clearly contradictory. If there are “things” in the plural, they are not “one” but “many”. However, the statement can still be true in a limited sense that is most easily defined in the negative: there is no god – or, which is the same in this context, there is no spiritual realm that is cut off from the causal interconnections of the material world. Philosophical materialism is a defence of the “know-ability” of the world. It is not tied to any particular conception of the physical nature of matter.

When Marx lays out the basic principle of materialism in “Theses on Feuerbach”, he distinguishes it from “hitherto existing materialism” in which “the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively” (Engels 1976b, p. 61). In the Marxist view, the unifying factor in “reality” is our connection to it, i.e., our experience of it and our production of it. This is not a question of limiting “what is” to our subjective experience. Rather, the point is that we can only know that part of the universe that we engage with. As Mao

famously said, “If you want knowledge, you must take part in the practice of changing reality. If you want to know the taste of a pear, you must change the pear by eating it yourself” (Mao 1969, I, 300).

If there is no realm that is cut off from the causal interconnections of the material world, this must apply to the subject also. The image of the philosopher as a lonely seeker of truth who examines the contents of his own mind isolated from the rest of the world is a deceptive metaphor. Any subjective action, no matter how individual and solitary, can be understood only in the context of the social and natural world that gave rise to it.

Consequently, Marxism argues that all knowledge of the world ultimately comes from social practice. Marxism lays particular stress on human activity in the production of the physical necessities for sustaining life, but social practice also includes “class struggle, political life, scientific and artistic pursuits; in short, as a social being, man participates in all spheres of the practical life of society. Thus man, in varying degrees, comes to know the different relations between man and man, not only through his material life but also through his political and cultural life (both of which are intimately bound up with material life)” (Mao 1969, I, 296).

So the essential point of the Marxist theory of philosophical materialism is that knowledge comes from social practice. Does Marxist theory assert that matter has any universal characteristics? Yes – but one thing only: it moves. Matter and motion are a unity of opposites. In fact, one could say that this is the fundamental opposition that underlies all dialectics: the contradiction between matter, presence, “there-ness” on the one hand, and movement, absence, “not there-ness” on the other.

One Divides into Two

What is a thing? Bertell Ollman argues that “In the view which currently dominates the social sciences, things exist and undergo change. The two are logically distinct. History is something that happens to things; it is not part of their nature. Hence the difficulty of examining change in subjects from which it has been removed at the start” (1990, p. 32).

Dialectics, on the other hand, understands the world as process. It understands objects as points of relative stability in an endless flow where the only absolute is change itself. If a thing is examined closely enough – no matter how apparently simple and solid – the solidity dissolves, and the simplicity turns out to be complex. This complexity is not understood as a theory of atomic elements, although that is one form the complexity can take. Rather, the complexity is a dynamic process, an opposition between the forces of stability and change. This is what Lenin describes as the kernel of dialectics: “the recognition (discovery) of the contradictory, *mutually exclusive*, opposite tendencies in all phenomena and processes of nature (*including* mind and society)” (1972a, p. 359).

The nature of this opposition is something that can be determined only concretely, in practice. Dialectics, as such, tells us nothing about anything in particular. It is a general theory of the nature of movement and change and the method of study and presentation that follows from it. It is not a substitute for investigation. Rather, one thinks in opposites as one seeks to unravel the internal logic of the thing/process/phenomenon under investigation. Marx could write about wishing to explain in only a few printers sheets “what is *rational* in the

method which Hegel discovered and at the same time mystified” (quoted in Bhaskar p. 87), because dialectics is an immanent logic that can be understood deeply only in the study of phenomena in their actual development. As Mao puts it, “...it is precisely in the particularity of contradiction that the universality of contradiction resides” (Mao 1969, I, 316).

Mao’s Early Writing on Dialectical Materialism

Mao’s foundational works on the philosophical front are *On Practice* and *On Contradiction*, said to be a product of Mao’s lectures in Yen’an in 1937. The final versions appeared in his *Selected Works*, first published in 1952. Mao’s authorship of the texts and their dates of composition have been disputed over the years (Doolin and Golas 1964; Cohen 1964; Wittfogel 1963; Schram 1967), but the discovery of pre-liberation texts seem to confirm Mao’s authorship and their early provenance (Knight 1980). Although there are constant references to philosophical principles running throughout Mao’s writing, it could be argued that – at least until the Cultural Revolution – there are no new principles put forward, just the development and application of the principles articulated in these two works.

On Practice

In *On Practice*, Mao describes the process of acquiring knowledge, testing it and deepening it. Mao, following Lenin, uses the metaphor of a spiral to describe the way knowledge moves from the particular to the general, from practice to

theory to practice again, each time on a higher level. We sum up the result of our practical activity and turn it into theory, which is used to guide further practice. In the process our new theories are tested by practice to further develop theory.

Practice, knowledge, again practice, and again knowledge. This form repeats itself in endless cycles, and with each cycle the content of practice and knowledge rises to a higher level. (Mao 1969, I, 308)

The process described is that of an unending series, so there is no question of our ever attaining absolute truth. But more than this, we are not just learning about the world as we climb the spiral, we are changing it, so the process of acquiring knowledge and using it creates a moving target. However, in this essay the impression is given that the growth of knowledge is a simple step-by-step accumulation, rather like panning for gold, where each dip in the river yields a more refined product. The process is more problematic than that – and more dialectical.

The slow accumulation of facts combined with the gradual development of theory describes what Thomas Kuhn calls “normal science” (Kuhn 1970). But this is punctuated with cataclysmic events – what Bachelard called an “epistemic break” – where a theoretical framework is shattered and replaced by a new paradigm (Nickles 2010). Dialectical theory allows for this, requires it in fact – quantitative changes resulting in a qualitative leap – but there is a tacit assumption that the leap will be forward, not backward. This is not to say that mistakes won’t be uncovered and corrected, but there is the assumption that established truths will not be overthrown.

Kuhn argues on the contrary that the history of science shows just these kinds of “leap-backward” revolutions. He gives as an example the leap from Newton’s to Einstein’s theories of gravity. The established view – and the general Marxist view – has been that Newton is a special case of Einstein, that it applies to relatively medium-sized bodies at medium speeds, but that it fails to account for velocities approaching the speed of light. In this view, to put it in Engels’ terminology, Newton’s theory is absolutely true within relative limits, but only relatively true with absolutely no limits – a perfect example of the interpenetration of opposites, in this case, the opposition between relative and absolute truth.

The problem is, in a number of important respects, Einstein’s theory flat out contradicts Newton’s. For example, the idea of gravity as action at a distance in Newton is contradicted and replaced by the concept of curved space. Kuhn writes:

The notion of a match between the ontology of a theory and its “real” counterpart in nature now seems to me illusive in principle. Besides, as a historian, I am impressed with the implausibility of the view. I do not doubt, for example, that Newton’s mechanics improves on Aristotle’s and that Einstein’s improves on Newton’s as instruments for puzzle-solving. But I can see in their succession no coherent direction of ontological development. (1970, p. 206)

In my view, the confusion arises here due to a misunderstanding of the nature of theory in Marxist epistemology (a misunderstanding shared by many Marxists). Theory is a guide to practice and can be understood only as linked to practice –

not as a thing in itself. This is how Marx described the result of the investigative process in writing *Capital*:

Only after this work is done, can the actual *movement* be adequately described. If this is done successfully, if the *life* of the subject-matter is ideally reflected as in a mirror... (2007, p. 25) [italics mine]

Theory as such is a description of how things move – not a static snapshot – and it is the understanding of how things move that makes theory useful as a guide to practice. This is why mathematical formulas are so important to science. They can be a concentrated description of movement.

Here is how Stephen Hawking describes theory in physics.

A theory of physics is just a mathematical model that we use to describe the results of observations. A theory is a good theory if it is an elegant model, if it describes a wide class of observations, and if it predicts the results of new observations. Beyond that, it makes no sense to ask if it corresponds to reality, because we do not know what reality is independent of a theory. (1994, p. 44)

Not all science is so thoroughly susceptible to description through mathematics as physics is, but all theory aspires to describe how things move, and it is this model of movement that can be tested and refined in practice. In the case of Newton and Einstein, as Kuhn points out, the mathematic formulas (mechanics) do show progress in our understanding of how the universe moves.

Ontological metaphors such as curved space or action at a distance help us to imagine what is “out there” and to develop new models of how it moves, which can then be tested, but scientific progress is not expressed in ontology.

Applying these criteria, is such a thing as a science of revolution possible? Scientific Marxism claims to be a science on the basis that knowledge of capitalism and how to make revolution against it is cumulative: each revolution learns from previous ones. In this view, revolutionary struggle would be considered a form of experimental practice; revolutionary theory, a summation and concentration of the results of these experiments. The Russian revolution would not have been possible without the summed up experience of the Paris Commune. The Chinese revolution would not have been possible without the summed up experience of the Russian revolution.

At the same time, there is evidence that each forward leap requires an epistemic break with the received wisdom of previous revolutionary theories. The Russian revolution would not have been possible if the Bolshevik Party had not been prepared to break with the economism of the Social Democratic Second International (Lenin 1964a). Similarly, attempts to make a revolution in China based on the simple application of the Russian template to the radically different situation in China resulted in the near destruction of the Chinese Communist Party by the Kuomintang in 1927 (Mao 1975, pp. 102,103).

On Contradiction

In the Marxist canon, Mao's essay *On Contradiction* is probably the most systematic exposition of dialectics understood as the principle of contradiction. It follows closely a short essay in Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* (not originally intended for publication) called *On the Question of Dialectics*. Mao's essay is considerably longer, although still only about 15,000 words in English translation. It develops Lenin's ideas and gives them a practical edge. Mao presents the topic under six headings: "the two world outlooks, the universality of contradiction, the particularity of contradiction, the principal contradiction and the principal aspect of a contradiction, the identity and struggle of the aspects of a contradiction, and the place of antagonism in contradiction" (Mao 1969, p. 311).

The Two World Outlooks

Marxism distinguishes between two opposing theories of change. The first theory, it terms "metaphysical". This sees development as a matter of increase and decrease in quantity or as change of place. The causes of movement are external to the object that is moved. Consequently, whatever level of causality is being considered, objects are treated as hard units that interact with other hard units. Newtonian physics is the classic image of this kind of metaphysical explanation.

In describing dialectics, the metaphor of a river is often used. Dialectics sees the world as an ever-changing flow with eddies and currents representing patterns and temporary balances that constantly appear and disappear. Development is a process of "the division of a unity into mutually exclusive opposites and their

reciprocal relation” (Lenin 1972b, XXXVIII, 358). Opposites are mutually interdependent. If one side is “devoured” by the other, the process has come to an end, and a new process begins, again characterized by the division into opposing forces.

The metaphysical point of view and the dialectical point of view are both used constantly in everyday life, but overall, dialectics is the dominant aspect of the contradiction, because metaphysics is a subset of dialectics. That is to say, in dialectics the stability manifest in discrete objects is a special case produced by the temporary balance of opposed forces. The geographer David Harvey uses an image from the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus to make this point:

We all know what Heraclitus meant when he said that we cannot step into the same river twice, but we also all know that there is a sense in which we can return again and again to the banks of the same river. At this point, however, there may indeed arise some sort of claim for the superiority of the dialectical view, precisely because it allows for an understanding of “things” and systems as if they are real and stable as a special case of the proposition that processes are always at work creating and sustaining “things” and systems. (1996, pp. 61, 62)

It may seem like the term “metaphysics” is used here in a sense that’s pretty far from the original use of the word, which comes from Aristotle and was variously defined by him as the study of “being as such” or the study of “first causes” (van Inwagen 2008). The connection is this: dialectics sees movement as a property of matter, in fact, the only universal property of matter. Matter is

ultimately self-moving. Movement arises out of the struggle of opposites. But if movement is abstracted from physical objects, if change is understood to come from the outside, ultimately that must lead back to a prime mover, a First Cause, to some form of God.

There is a link here between metaphysics and traditional logic. It goes like this. The first principle of traditional logic is identity:

$$A = A.$$

If “A” is considered purely as a symbol, the above statement seems intuitively obvious and absurd to deny. But if “A” is considered to be an actually existing object, the statement becomes more problematic.

Dog = Dog is still an abstraction, but what if we reduce it to particular dogs?

Lassie = Rex, the wonder dog.

Now the statement is far from obvious. The two dogs would have things in common: they are both dogs; each has four legs, etc. So they would be equal in some senses, but clearly not in others – especially not if Lassie is pregnant.

But even if the same dog is on both sides of the equation, the equality is problematic.

Lassie = Lassie.

You still have to ask yourself the question: Lassie, when? Because Lassie in the morning and Lassie a few hours later are very alike but not absolutely identical. We are back to Heraclites and his river. It turns out that a dog (or even a rock) is not a simple object, but a process that flows like a river. Consequently, the statement “A = A” is true only when the two sides of the equation are considered as frozen in time, abstracted from the world of movement and change. As Henri Lefebvre writes in *Dialectical Materialism*, “Formal logic is the logic of

the instant: the logic of a simplified world” (p. 74). And this, again, is the connection between metaphysics and traditional logic.

Nietzsche puts it this way:

The “A” of logic is, like the atom, a reconstruction of the thing--If we do not grasp this, but make of logic a criterion of true being, we are on the way to positing as realities all those hypostases: substance, attribute, object, subject, action, etc.; that is, to conceiving a metaphysical world.

(1968a, p. 516)

Are dialectics and formal logic compatible? The earliest available draft of *On Contradiction* contains a section comparing formal logic with dialectics. It was cut out of later drafts. Nick Knight speculates that this may have been because Mao felt he had been unable to do the subject justice at the time (1980, p. 649). At any rate, Mao’s views developed in later years. In the excised section of *On Contradiction*, Mao argues that dialectics and formal logic are incompatible, because the law of absolute identity fails to account for change.

It can therefore be seen that all the laws of formal logic oppose contradictoriness and advocate the characteristic of identity, oppose development and change of concepts and things, and advocate their solidification and immobility, and this is in direct opposition to dialectics.

(1980, p. 662)

However, in 1965, Mao suggested that formal logic might be considered a subset of dialectics:

It has been said that the relationship of formal logic to dialectics is like the relationship between elementary mathematics and higher mathematics.

This is a formulation which should be studied further. Formal logic is concerned with the form of thought, and is concerned to ensure that there

is no contradiction between successive stages in an argument. It is a

specialized science. Any kind of writing must make use of formal logic.

Formal logic does not concern itself with major premises: it is incapable of

so doing... One cannot acquire much fresh knowledge through formal

logic. Naturally one can draw inferences, but the conclusion is still

enshrined in the major premise. (1965, p. 3)

It could be argued that Mao's later views on logic don't necessarily contradict his earlier views. Rather, he was writing about what in modern logic are considered to be the two different aspects of logic, syntax and semantics. Here again, there is a parallel between Marxist dialectics and Nietzsche's dialectics. Steven Hales, in an article on Nietzsche and logic, argues that Nietzsche's apparently contradictory comments about logic are due to the fact that he recognizes the necessity of logical syntax but rejects the metaphysical implications of logical semantics. Hales gives the following description of logical syntax:

It provides the rules for the manipulation of the operators, connectives, quantifiers, predicate letters, variables, and constants of the formal system,

how the symbols can be moved around, and how theorems are to be proven from the axioms. Syntax and proof theory tell us nothing about the world and make no assumptions about the applicability of the symbols of our formal language to anything at all. (p. 825)

These are the rules of argumentation that Mao agrees are essential to any form of writing. The other aspect of logic is the semantic:

The interpretation of the formulas of logic is the business of semantics. Semantics specifies non-empty domains of entities, or universes of discourse, along with an interpretation function that leads us from the symbols supplied by the syntax to the entities in the domain. That is, semantics is concerned with the meaning of our logical symbols. The interpretation function assigns a unique object in the domain to each constant, tells us which things the variables can stand for, and provides an extension in the domain for each predicate letter. (p. 825)

It is semantic logic that requires the existence of “things”, of objects that are self-identical. It is the semantic equation of the abstract units of syntax with the complex and contradictory world of movement and change that Nietzsche rejects. This is also the basis of the Marxist critique of logic, a critique of the disconnect between logical syntax and the world of becoming. And even here, the rejection is not absolute. Marxist and Nietzschean dialectics both recognize the utility of logic with its metaphysical assumptions; they simply reject the assumptions as anything more than rough approximations.

The Universality and the Particularity of Contradiction

The universality of contradiction resides in the fact that it is the one and only universal law of motion. But the universe is varied and complex and there are many forms of motion in nature and society. Each form of motion is driven by its own particular contradiction, and qualitatively different contradictions can only be resolved by qualitatively different methods. This is the particularity of contradiction.

The section on particularity, as Mao explains, is the most important part of the essay. It is deceptive in its simplicity. Mao is taking a very traditional approach to dialectics in these passages, but he is also taking further a process first begun by Lenin's essay *On the Question of Dialectics*, a process of stripping dialectics of any remaining connections with Hegel's grand metaphysical concept of Totality. This will become clear in later works first available during the Cultural Revolution, where Mao explicitly attacks the concepts of Totality and negation of the negation, but these concepts are already notable in their absence.

The philosopher Louis Althusser points out that although Mao talks about simple processes that have only one contradiction as opposed to complex processes that have more than one contradiction, he only gives examples of complex contradictions. Althusser argues that this is generally true in Marxist-Leninist literature and that the reason for this is that contradiction is an analytical tool for understanding nature and social processes in their actuality and "only exists in the concrete contents it enables us to think" (1969, p. 217).

In a way, you could say that here dialectics joins the working class. It becomes a humble tool of analysis, grand only in the sense of its universal usefulness as a tool for understanding and changing the world.

This dialectical world outlook teaches us primarily how to observe and analyse the movement of opposites in different things and, on the basis of such analysis, to indicate the methods for resolving contradictions. (Mao 1969, I, 315)

The Identity and Struggle of Opposites

Identity

The unity (or identity) of opposites means that the two aspects of a contradiction presuppose each other and both aspects coexist in a single entity. It also means that under given conditions, each can transform into the other.

The transformation of opposites into each other is the part of *On Contradiction* (and also of Lenin's *On the Question of Dialectics*) that is most essential for understanding the dialectical nature of contradiction but also probably the most difficult to understand. Colletti argues that "Marxism, although it is constantly speaking in terms of contradictions and opposition, has no clear ideas on this subject." In particular, he criticises Lenin and Mao for failing to distinguish between contrariety and contradiction (Colletti 1975, 3-29).

It is true that in *On Practice* and elsewhere, contradiction is dealt with on various levels of abstraction, and the difference between these various levels is not made clear. But the dialectical position is that there is contradiction wherever

there is movement and that each contradiction has its own particular form of movement. Consequently, to develop a typology of contradictions would be a form of scholasticism: however many categories of opposition that were catalogued, determinate change would exceed the boundaries.

Consider, for example these two types of contradictions discussed by Mao in his various treatments of dialectics:

1. The war between the Kuomintang Army and the Red Army.
2. The contradiction between offence and defence in war.

The first is a contradiction between two physical forces, including soldiers, weapons, and logistical support. The transformation of opposites into each other in this example means that the side that was secondary can become dominant, and the side that was dominant can become secondary. The character of the war goes through a qualitative leap when this happens. Historically, the Red Army went from fighting for survival to fighting to wipe out the enemy and liberate the country. That was the transformation of one side of the contradiction into the other dominant side. How was this contradiction resolved? The war ended when one side defeated the other. Mao put it this way: “The synthesis took place like this: their armies came, and we devoured them, we ate them bite by bite” (1975, p. 224). The Red Army continued to exist after its victory over the Kuomintang Army. But in fact, the old contradiction that linked the two armies in war had come to an end, and a new situation had arisen: the People’s Republic of China came into existence. The Red Army that existed in the revolutionary war was transformed by victory in the war and by its entry into the new situation and its contradictions.

The second contradiction, between offence and defence, is an opposition of two contrary ideas. If left on this level of pure abstraction, it is a logical opposition, rather than a dialectical contradiction. But of course, it is not left on the level of pure abstraction. In *Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War* (Mao 1969, II), written shortly after the first version of *On Contradiction*, Mao goes into great detail, analysing the back and forth movement in offensive and defensive tactics used in “the enemy's ‘encirclement and suppression’ campaigns and the Red Army's counter-campaigns against them.” A purely defensive battle can suddenly become an offensive counterattack, and conversely, an attack can be forced onto the defence. This again is the transformation of opposites into each other.

This does not mean that the concept of defence suddenly becomes redefined to mean offence, but that a process that is primarily defensive can become offensive, and vice versa. Even here, though, on the level of definition, there is no absolute separation between offense and defence. The opposed concepts do imply each other. Every offense has a defensive aspect, and vice versa. Hence, the familiar saying, “The best defence is a good offence.” Another way of putting this is to say that dialectics describes all forms of movement, both movement in physical processes and movement in ideas.

The Marxist canon gives many examples of logical oppositions that are abstracted from the movement of particular ideas and practices: truth and error, the universal and the particular, theory and practice. The canon also gives many examples of contradiction as the struggle between opposed physical forces: bourgeoisie vs. proletariat, peasant vs. landlord, slave vs. slave owner... And these are just two examples of possible types of contradiction.

To take another example of a contradiction from the Marxist canon, consider the contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production in capitalist society. This is not a set of logical contraries, nor is it a simple opposition between two opposed physical forces. In fact, the physical manifestation of both aspects of the contradiction is the same: human society and the natural and built environment in which it is embedded, but considered on the one hand as a socially organized system of production, and on the other hand as a system of private ownership and distribution. According to Marxist theory, it is the invention and creative energy that goes into the productive forces which drives forward the development of society, and consequently, in general, the productive forces are the principal aspect of the contradiction. But at times when the forces of production can develop no further without changes in the structure of ownership, the opposites are transformed into each other, and the relations of production become principal.

When it is impossible for the productive forces to develop without a change in the relations of production, then the change in the relations of production plays the principal and decisive role. (Mao 1969, I, 336)

This particular transformation of opposites is central to understanding the debate on voluntarism versus economic determinism and will be considered at greater length later. For now, the key point is that although in a different form than the previous types of contradictions mentioned, it has the same universal characteristic: two contradictory aspects that presuppose each other and can, under given conditions, transform into each other. Every form of movement has

its own particularity that must be studied concretely and not just in the abstract – but every particular form of movement has this and only this one universal characteristic, the unity and struggle of opposites.

Struggle

Mao starts out the section on the struggle of opposites with a quote from Lenin's *On the Question of Dialectics*:

The unity (coincidence, identity, equal action) of opposites is conditional, temporary, transitory, relative. The struggle of mutually exclusive opposites is absolute, just as development and motion are absolute. (1972b, XXXVIII, 38)

When a contradiction is balanced, in relative equilibrium, it appears to be “thing-like”. That is to say, it appears to have some form of permanence. For example, although we know an egg will break, hatch or decay eventually, it appears for a time to have self-identity, to simply “be there”. The metaphysical outlook takes this apparent self-identity as a simple fact. Dialectics is based on the understanding that stability is temporary and change is absolute. A thing may last in apparent self-identity for a very long time, but no “thing” lasts forever. The only absolute in the universe is change.

Consequently, the balance between opposed forces in any process can only be conditional and temporary. The struggle of opposites is absolute – but it is not absolute in a mystical sense, where the universe is conceived to be balanced between yin and yang, positive and negative or any other set of contrary abstractions. One divides into two, but that's not the end of the story – it is the

beginning. Any process is a struggle between the old and dying away and the new and arising. In the end, one side eats up the other, and a new process begins. The universe is fundamentally not balanced, not in equilibrium. This is not an article of faith, but a simple observation: everything changes.

That is why dialectics, properly understood, is, as Marx put it:

a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom and its doctrinaire professors, because it includes in its comprehension and affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up; because it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence; because it lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary. (2007, p. 26)

The Fundamental Contradiction and the Principal Contradiction

I've taken this section in a different order than Mao wrote it – and I've changed the terminology somewhat. The reason for the different order of presentation is that I would like to draw a distinction between these later sections and the previous sections that deal with ontological terms such as “universal and particular” and “identity and struggle”. These terms refer to ontology, which is to say, they are making a claim to describe what is essential about being – or more accurately, about becoming.

But some of the terms in the sections that follow are working rules of thumb rather than ontological statements. They are not absolute. A complex situation where there is no principal contradiction is not inconceivable, merely unlikely. Similarly, an exact balance between two opposites such that there is no principal aspect is not impossible, but it is unusual and bound to change. This is another way of saying that balance and stability are temporary and conditional but struggle and uneven development are absolute.

Althusser writes:

On Contradiction contains a whole series of analyses in which the Marxist conception of contradiction appears in a quite un-Hegelian light. Its essential concepts would be sought in vain in Hegel: principal and secondary contradiction; principal and secondary aspect of a contradiction; antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradiction; law of the uneven development of a contradiction. (1969, p. 94, note 96)

Actually, Althusser has loaded the dice here by leaving out key ontological terms from *On Contradiction* that do appear in Hegel, such as “universal and particular” and “identity and struggle”. With the exception of the last term in Althusser’s list – the law of uneven development – all of the terms he mentions are, as he claims, “descriptive”. However, what is being described are tools that Mao has developed in the course of revolutionary war by applying the basic concepts of dialectics to analyze political and military situations, understand their dynamics and pinpoint the key link that could move the situation forward.

I should admit here that I've loaded the dice a little myself, because the way I've used the term "principal contradiction" depends on a distinction between the principal contradiction and the fundamental contradiction, a distinction which appears in Mao only by implication. Mao uses these two terms interchangeably to refer to the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie – and some sections of the international Maoist movement have continued to use these terms as interchangeable synonyms. However, Mao uses both terms in very different contexts.

Mao uses the term "principal contradiction" when describing the play of forces in a complex process involving many contradictions. He describes the principal contradiction as that which determines or influences the existence and development of other contradictions.

If in any process there are a number of contradictions, one of them must be the principal contradiction playing the leading and decisive role, while the rest occupy a secondary and subordinate position. Therefore, in studying any complex process in which there are two or more contradictions, we must devote every effort to finding its principal contradiction. Once this principal contradiction is grasped, all problems can be readily solved.

(Mao 1969, I, 332)

When Mao uses the term "fundamental contradiction" he adds an additional element, complexity over time, where a lengthy process may go through various stages of development. He describes the fundamental contradiction as that which determines the essence of a process.

The fundamental contradiction in the process of development of a thing and the essence of the process determined by this fundamental contradiction will not disappear until the process is completed; but in a lengthy process the conditions usually differ at each stage. The reason is that, although the nature of the fundamental contradiction in the process of development of a thing and the essence of the process remain unchanged, the fundamental contradiction becomes more and more intensified as it passes from one stage to another in the lengthy process. In addition, among the numerous major and minor contradictions which are determined or influenced by the fundamental contradiction, some become intensified, some are temporarily or partially resolved or mitigated, and some new ones emerge; hence the process is marked by stages. (Mao 1969, I, 325)

Further developing this distinction in contexts, some sections of the international Maoist movement have treated the two terms as having clearly different functions. The term “fundamental contradiction” is used to describe that which defines a complex process, in the sense that resolution of this contradiction would terminate the process and initiate a new one out of the ashes of the old. In the meantime, a process might go through various stages, depending on the development of the fundamental contradiction, its interaction with other contradictions and their resolution or intensification.

The term “principal contradiction” is used to describe that which is most intense and is exercising the strongest influence on the development of the other

contradictions at any given time. The principal and the fundamental contradiction in a situation could be identical, but not necessarily so.

The distinction between these two terms was not just a question of playing around with words. The need for it arose out of the actual struggles that were taking place in the Sixties. The Sixties were the high point of wars of national liberation. The revolution in China had been consolidated, and the Cuban revolution and the wars of independence in Indo-China were inspiring liberation struggles around the world.

Lin Biao, in the very influential speech “Long Live the Victory of People’s War!”, defined the principal contradiction in the world at that time in the following way:

Since World War II, revolutionary storms have been rising in this area, and today they have become the most important force directly pounding U.S. imperialism. The contradiction between the revolutionary peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America and the imperialists headed by the United States is the principal contradiction in the contemporary world. (1966, p. 24)

If the principal contradiction is defined as the most intense and influential contradiction at a particular given time, then this was clearly a correct analysis. But it did not gainsay the view of Maoists that the capitalist system dominated the globe, that its defining contradiction was between the capitalist class and the working class, and that the contradiction between the oppressed colonies and imperialism would only be finally resolved by a world revolution that overthrew

the capitalist system. In other words: the principal contradiction in the world was expressed by the national liberation struggles, but the basic – the fundamental – contradiction defining the world-wide system of capitalism was the class contradiction.

The internal situation in the United States made this distinction, if anything, even clearer. The Civil Rights movement had metamorphosed into the Black liberation struggle and had linked up with Chicano and other liberation movements within the United States. Struggle around race and national oppression was clearly the most intense struggle in the Fifties and Sixties, and it had a huge influence on the growing anti-Vietnam war movement and the nascent women's liberation movement. At the same time, Black, Chicano and other national minorities were overwhelmingly working class, and they were a large component in the most militant sections of the working class. Strikes and other forms of militant struggle were influenced or often even determined by the national question.

Following on from this analysis, the Bay Area Revolutionary Union, the largest Maoist group in the United States at that time, argued that while the fundamental contradiction in the United States was the class contradiction, the principal contradiction was between the oppressed nationalities and U.S. imperialism (R.U. pp. 37, 46). In this view, the principal contradiction was still profoundly linked to the fundamental class contradiction, both because the overwhelming majority of the oppressed nationalities inside the U.S. were proletarian and because the resolution of this contradiction could not be achieved short of proletarian revolution. [See also Charles Bettelheim for a similar usage of

“fundamental contradiction” in analyzing contradictions within the U.S.S.R. (1975, p. 146).] ⁴

Returning now to the distinction I made at the beginning of this section between an ontological term and a term that was simply a working tool, the fundamental contradiction would be an ontological term and the principal contradiction would be a working tool. Every process, no matter how simple or complex, has a contradiction that defines it, that makes it what it is, a fundamental contradiction. This is simply a restatement of the principle of the universality of contradiction. But it is not true that every complex process has a principal contradiction. For example, a few years after he wrote *Long Live the Victory of the People's War*, Lin Biao made a report where he said there were four major contradictions in the world at that time:

The contradiction between the oppressed nations on the one hand and imperialism and social-imperialism on the other; the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in the capitalist and revisionist countries; the contradiction between imperialist and social-imperialist countries and among the imperialist countries; and the contradiction between socialist countries on the one hand and imperialism and social-imperialism on the other. (1969, p. 81)

⁴ Alain Badiou had a different interpretation from either of the above. He argued that the text of *On Contradiction* differentiates between a fundamental structural contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production, and a principal contradiction, which is dynamic and refers to the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat exclusively (2009, 26). However, there is no basis for this view in Mao's text, which uses both terms, fundamental and principal, to refer to the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Mao 1969, I, 325, 331).

He didn't specify which contradiction was principal. At that time, the Vietnam War was still raging and there was general agreement that the principal contradiction was between oppressed nations and imperialism, but a few years later, as the tide of national liberation struggles receded, the situation became less clear. All of the above contradictions had the potential to flare up and lead to war. Any of them could become the principal contradiction. But through all these changes, the fundamental contradiction of world capitalism continued to be that between the capitalist class and the working class.

The Fundamental Contradiction and Secondary Contradictions

This section doesn't appear in Mao's *On Contradiction*, but it is essentially a continuation and further elaboration of the previous section.

The fundamental contradiction between the socialized forces of production and the private relations of production brings into play all sorts of forces and contradictions. Foremost among these is proletariat versus the bourgeoisie, which is the embodiment in social classes of the fundamental contradiction, but there are all sorts of other contradictions that are also brought into play, including contradictions around national and sexual oppression, inter-imperialist war, peasantry and remnants of feudalism. These other contradictions are not just "and also's", they are entangled with the fundamental contradiction, complicating it but also in part generating and being generated by it – so much so that at times they can intensify to the point where they become the principal contradiction.

The fact that the proletariat embodies one side of the fundamental contradiction means two things:

- It can never completely free itself until it has destroyed capitalism and eliminated all class exploitation.
- Once it has destroyed capitalism and led the way in the creation of a new social system, it will have freed itself entirely – freed itself so completely that it will pass out of existence as a class, as will the bourgeoisie, because the exploitation that defined them as two opposed classes will have ended.⁵

The fact that the other major contradictions are entangled with the fundamental contradiction but not identical to it means a number of things:

- These contradictions cannot be finally resolved until the fundamental contradiction is resolved.
- These contradictions have their own particularity, their own forms of struggle which must be directly addressed. The contradictions won't just fade away as direct class exploitation is eliminated.
- Resolution of these contradictions – or bringing them to a completely new stage of existence – is a necessary condition for the complete resolution of the fundamental contradiction.

As an example, consider the sexual contradiction, which is itself a tangle of contradictions.⁶ There is the contradiction between men and women, the contradiction between women and the system of male supremacy, contradictions

⁵ Exploitation, as a technical term in Marxism, refers not just to some kind of oppressive relationship, but to the appropriation of surplus value. The working class sells its labour power at a price which varies, but tends to fluctuate around the cost of the production and reproduction of that labour power. But with technological progress, as labour power becomes more productive, an individual labourer is able to produce considerably more than just what it costs for his/her maintenance and reproduction. The difference between the cost of labour power and the value it produces is "surplus value". In Marxist theory, the Capitalist system is maintained through the appropriation of that surplus value by the owners of the various forms of capital. It is this appropriation that defines the nature of exploitation.

⁶ This would be true of any actually existing contradiction: as you look at it closely, it turns out to be a tangle of contradictions; and as you look at these individual contradictions, they turn out to be tangles of other contradictions, and so on.

around birth and child rearing, and the many contradictions that are a mixture of class and sex, such as unequal pay, the glass ceiling, channelling into limited occupations.

In *The Dialectic of Sex*, a book that came out at the beginning of the 1970s, Shulamith Firestone argued that there was a fundamental contradiction between men and women:

The biological division of the sexes for the procreation of the species... [is] the fundamental natural duality from which grows all further division into classes. (1970, p. 175) Just as the end goal of socialist revolution was not only the elimination of the economic class *privilege* but of the economic class *distinction* itself, so the end goal of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of the sex *distinction* itself. (p. 11)

It is true that the division into male and female goes back to before the class contradiction arose. It goes back to before the human race evolved, back to animals, plants and even bacteria. The process defined by male/female is not “life” in general, since there is also asexual reproduction in some life forms, but it is a major strand of biological life. So the contradiction between male and female is clearly more fundamental than the class contradiction, if the term is used loosely to refer to that which is the most basic in a chronological sense – primordial, if you will – rather than as the defining contradiction of capitalism.

But although there is no reason to believe that the division between male and female will go on forever – any more than the human race will – it is probably

reasonable to assume that even after the final victory of communism and the complete abolition of class society, there will still be a division between male and female.⁷ So the whole long story of sexual oppression in class society is just one chapter in a much longer story of male/female sexual division.

In Marxist theory, there was a precipitating event – the development of the forces of production through agriculture and animal husbandry – that qualitatively changed the relations between the sexes. Before that, slavery was not a practical proposition. Productive capacity was too low. In a hunter-gatherer society the best a slave would be able to do was feed themselves – and possibly deplete the food supply.

Once slavery became viable, the already existing division of labour between men and women became entangled with it. Reproduction and childbirth made women to a certain extent dependent on men. This dependency was translated into domination and ownership.

This theory was first developed by Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1995). Although he was basing his theories on the latest anthropological research of the day, things have moved on since then, so the details of the process as he described it are not always exact, but Marxists would argue that the basic process is correctly described. In this view, the division of the sexes under capitalism has a class character. Capitalism depends on the exploitation of the sexual division in three ways:

- Women's role in the reproduction of labour power is itself unpaid labour.

⁷ It must be admitted, though, that this is only a probable assumption, since there is no telling how long it will take to reach the final victory of communism, and scientific control over biology will be developing apace.

- The super exploitation of women through lower wages and adverse working conditions is an important source of surplus value.
- Capitalism, as a form of exploitation and class dominance, naturally exploits any division in the opposed class just as water naturally seeps into the cracks and fissures of any surface that contains it.

This is why the struggle for women's liberation under capitalism has been a story of one step forwards, two steps back. Technological developments in both production and reproduction have given rise to some progress in women's liberation that seems irreversible, but it is probably fair to say that it seems less irreversible today than it did twenty years ago. Capitalism constantly regenerates women's oppression for both economic and ideological reasons. Women work in the shipyards in war, and then after the war are driven back into the home. Abortion is legalized and then outlawed again. Sexual liberation becomes a new kind of sexual slavery. We go from the burqa to the thong and back again.

Consequently, the cause of women's liberation is essentially linked to the cause of socialist revolution. The proletariat must fight for the emancipation of women because it is an essential part of building the unity of the class. It is also part of building a broader united front by uniting all who can be united in the cause of liberation. And because the sexual division in class society is essentially a class division, there will never be a non-exploitive, classless society until every form of domination and inequality between men and women is abolished.

It has to be said that historically, socialists have a very mixed record on the question of fighting for the cause of women's liberation. The Russian and Chinese revolutions fought for and achieved many improvements in women's rights, social status and empowerment, although tragically, in Russia under Stalin, a number of

these achievements were reversed. Looking at the role of socialists overall, along with some very inspirational practice, in my view there have been three main types of errors.

Postponement: the line that women's struggles should be subordinated to the class struggle and that after the revolution, things will naturally fall into place. This line very much goes against the basic theories of Marxism. Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao all fought against this line – but the practice of Communist Parties around the world hasn't always been up to their standards. Postponement is generally perceived by women – correctly – as denial.

Economic reductionism: A tendency to see women's liberation purely in economic terms, and so, to fight militantly around equal pay, job opportunities, divorce and abortion rights, but to deny the need for struggle around the more “touchy-feely” issues, such as marital issues, sexual emancipation and general types of consciousness-raising. In my view, Lenin's interview with Clara Zetkin is an example of this error (Lenin and Zetkin 1970). Lenin argues passionately for the importance of fighting on equal pay, etc., but he is very critical of Communist women's groups discussing marital and sexual problems. Lenin is concerned with drawing a line against any form of hedonism and sexual escapism, but the distinction between escapism and rebellion against social oppression is not always so clear.

It seems to me that this error is also partly the result of failing to take account of the particularity of contradiction. That is to say, sexual oppression is tied in with class oppression and many of the issues are common to class struggle, but it also has a life of its own, and issues that relate purely to sex must be dealt with also.

Tailism: Tailing after the bourgeois women's movement, rather than fighting for a proletarian line in the women's liberation struggle. This is not a question of fighting for dominance but for revolutionary content. The women's movement divides along class and racial lines. Fighting for a proletarian line means fighting for a movement that puts the demands of working women and women of colour at the center of the fight. This also means fighting for the most revolutionary line, because working-class women, just as the working class as a whole, have nothing in common with the system and nothing to lose but their chains. This is not true of other more bourgeois sections of the women's movement. The proletarian line also means that the Party fights for the active participation and leadership of the entire working class in each of these struggles – not just women fighting for women's liberation, national minorities fighting for national liberation etc., but the whole class taking on the fight against every form of oppression as if it were done to them.

Principal Aspect of a Contradiction

Even in a process that seems to be relatively stable, it is rare for the opposed forces to be absolutely equal. Far more often one aspect of the contradiction is dominant. The character of a process is determined by two things: the nature of the opposites that drive the process and which opposite is dominant. In analyzing a process, it is important to determine which aspect of the contradiction is dominant, because the whole character of a process is changed when the dominant aspect moves from one side to the other.

To take an example from Marxist theory, class society today is characterized primarily by the opposition between the capitalist class and the working class. If

the capitalist class is dominant, the system is capitalist. If the working class becomes dominant, the system would become socialist.

On the other hand, change in the principal aspect of a contradiction, while it fundamentally changes the character of a process, does not end it. To stay with the same example, it is not until the elimination of the bourgeoisie as a class and the elimination of the social and economic relations that give rise to the class divisions that class society will come to an end and Communism can begin – a new process that will give rise to its own contradictions.

The classic split between communists and anarchists on the role of the state hinges exactly around this point. Both sides agree that ultimately the state is an instrument of class domination. Communists argue that the working class should seize state power and use it to dominate the former ruling class, prevent their return to power and lay the basis for the elimination of class society. The anarchist position is that the object of a revolution should be the immediate and total destruction of the state in any form (Lenin 1970, pp. 102-109).

The Place of Antagonism in Contradiction

This topic is simply a special case of the particularity of contradiction. Each particular contradiction has its own form of movement and consequently its own form of resolution. In politics, some contradictions are antagonistic, but others are not – or at least should not be antagonistic, if handled correctly. Mao develops this theme in much greater detail in a later essay that came out in 1957, *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People*, where he distinguishes

between two different types of contradictions: contradictions among the people, and contradictions between the people and the enemy (1967; 1989).⁸

In a way this distinction, once made, seems obvious: not every difference of opinion must lead to war. But in practice, it is easy to forget. For Mao, the distinction between friend and enemy was of primary importance from his earliest days as a revolutionary to his last. The first page of the first article in the first volume of Mao's *Selected Works* starts out:

Who are our enemies? Who are our friends? This is a question of the first importance for the revolution. The basic reason why all previous revolutionary struggles in China achieved so little was their failure to unite with real friends in order to attack real enemies. (Mao 1969)

Who are your friends and who are your enemies – so important, and so easy to get wrong. But the difficulty becomes even greater after a revolution has seized power, and everybody is “for” the revolution – at least in name. “Waving the red flag to oppose the red flag” became an often used phrase in the Cultural Revolution precisely because of this difficulty (Chin 1970, p. 227).

When Mao wrote *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People*, he was in the early stages of coming to grips with the problems of building socialism in China and in particular with the problem of how to avoid the mistakes made by Stalin in the USSR. One of the main criticisms made of Stalin was that he had tended to deal with all disagreements as proof of enemy influence.

⁸ I've given two references to the speech here, because they differ in content. The MacFarquhar version is the earlier, unedited speech. The *Selected Works* version is a later, edited text that reflects the change in Mao's thinking. One key change was a view that antagonistic class contradictions would play a major role throughout the Socialist period.

One of the philosophical underpinnings of this mistake, according to Mao, was a failure to understand the role of antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradiction during socialist construction.

Lenin had drawn a distinction between antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradiction, and Mao quoted him in *On Contradiction*: “Antagonism and contradiction are not at all one and the same. Under socialism, the first will disappear, the second will remain” (Mao 1969, I, 345). However, strictly speaking, this quote appears to take a different line on the question of antagonism from that which Mao took in later years during the Cultural Revolution.

Lenin’s comment was a note scribbled in the margins of a book by Bukharin. The idea was not developed further, so it is not possible to be sure whether Lenin was referring to “the final victory of socialism”, i.e., to communism, or to the long period leading up to the final victory, i.e., the dictatorship of the proletariat. Stalin took the latter view and believed that antagonistic class contradictions had been eliminated in the Soviet Union (Stalin 1976b, 874). This led logically to the conclusion that all antagonistic criticism of the socialist system must be the product of collusion with foreign enemies.

Mao, on the other hand, in the process of summing up the experience of socialist construction in China, had come to the opposite conclusion – that class divisions and class struggle would last for a very long time under socialism:

We have won great victories. But the defeated class will still struggle.

These people are still around and this class still exists. Therefore, we cannot speak of final victory. Not even for decades. We must not lose our vigilance. According to the Leninist viewpoint, the final victory of a

socialist country not only requires the efforts of the proletariat and the broad masses of the people at home, but also involves the victory of the world revolution and the abolition of the system of exploitation of man by man over the whole globe, upon which all mankind will be emancipated. (Mao quoted in Lin 1969)

On this basis, Mao put forward the following principles:

- Contradictions will exist in human society for as long as human society exists. When human society disappears, contradictions will exist in whatever replaces it. (This echoes the above quote from Lenin.)
- The contradictions of capitalism will continue to exist in socialist society until the material foundations of class division are eliminated. The material foundations for class division include, for example, the division between town and country, the division between mental and manual labour, and the continued existence of the state.
- The class struggle will continue under socialism for as long as these class divisions exist. This will be for a very long time.
- The location of the most intense class struggle will be where power is concentrated: inside the Communist Party itself, particularly at the Party's highest levels of leadership.
- The Party, particularly the Party leadership, must be constantly subjected to criticism from the masses of workers and peasants. This process must be ongoing and be led by the Party.

These principles were the theoretical basis for the Cultural Revolution, an attempt to prevent capitalist restoration in China driven from within at the highest

levels of the Communist Party. A country of almost a billion people was shaken to its foundations. The “16- Point Decision” concerning the Cultural Revolution issued by the National Central Committee in August 1966 under Mao’s guidance contained the following key point:

Concentrate all forces to strike at the handful of ultra-reactionary bourgeois rightists. The main target of the present movement is those within the party who are in authority and are taking the capitalist road.
(Mao 1970)

Some sympathetic observers, Alain Badiou, for example, have described the Cultural Revolution as a failed attempt to replace the Communist Party with the spontaneous revolutionary activity of the masses.

In the end, the Cultural Revolution, even in its very impasse, bears witness to the impossibility truly and globally to free politics from the framework of the party-state that imprisons it. (Badiou 2005b, p. 406)

In this view, Mao backed down from the implications of the threat to the power structure. But Mao was clear throughout the Cultural Revolution that Party leadership was essential to the process. That was the paradox of the Cultural Revolution: it was an attempt by the Communist Party – or some sections of it – to lead a revolution against itself while at the same time maintaining the leadership of the Party over the state:

The definition of elements in the Party as the major enemy of the progress of socialist revolution had profound implications for the concept of Party leadership. It introduced a fundamental paradox. Not only is Party leadership necessary for socialist revolution, but it is also potentially the chief danger to socialist revolution.(Young 1980)

It is interesting – in the context of the Cultural Revolution – to look at Mao’s distinction between contradictions among the people and contradictions between the people and the enemy – and to compare it with Carl Schmitt’s distinction between friend and enemy. According to Schmitt, “The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy” (1966, p. 26). The distinction “is not derived from any other criteria” (p. 26). It is a kind of *tabula rasa* where any religious, moral, economic, ethical or other antithesis can transform into a political one only “if it is sufficiently strong to group human beings effectively according to friend and enemy” (p. 37).

“An enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity” (p. 28). Consequently, the ultimate meaning of friend and enemy resides in the possibility of war (p. 37). The possibility of war can be either a war between states or a civil war against domestic enemies (p. 46).

According to Schmitt, political power can take many forms – a national state, a theocratic, mercantile, or soldier state, a civil service state, a proletarian state or some other type of political entity (pp. 37, 38) – but ultimately it is this monopoly on war that defines it:

For as long as a people exists in the political sphere, this people must, even if only in the most extreme case – and whether this point has been reached has to be decided by it – determine by itself the distinction of friend and enemy... When it no longer possesses the capacity or the will to make this distinction, it ceases to exist politically. (p. 49)

Comparing Schmitt's friend-enemy concept to Mao's concept of contradiction between the people and the enemy, there is one decisive difference: class content. In Mao's theoretical approach, the political is determined by the fundamental contradiction between the working class and the capitalist class. The character of the state is judged accordingly.

The friend-enemy concept is essentially value-free, determined only by itself. The state's only moral imperative is that of self-preservation. "The justification of war does not reside in its being fought for ideals or norms of justice, but in its being fought against a real enemy" (p. 49).

Carl Schmitt was one of the first to warn of the danger of Hitler and of the possibility that the Weimar Republic could be overthrown by legal methods (Bendersky 2007, p. 6). However, once Hitler took state power, Schmitt joined the Nazi Party. This may have been morally reprehensible, but it was logically consistent. Mao, on the other hand, equally consistent, went to his grave warning that there was a serious possibility of a capitalist restoration in China and that the need for revolution would never go away (Mao, quoted in Editorial Departments of "Renmin Ribao" and others 1976).

The lack of class content in Schmitt's theory of the political is itself a form of class content, carrying with it an essentially theological view of "man's" innate nature:

Ingenuous anarchism reveals that the belief in the natural goodness of man is clearly tied to the radical denial of state and government. One follows from the other, and both foment each other ... What remains is the remarkable and, for many, certainly disquieting diagnosis that all genuine political theories presuppose man to be evil, i.e., by no means an unproblematic but a dangerous and dynamic being. (pp. 60, 61)

Marxist theory, although it denies that there is such a thing as innate human nature, either good or evil, takes a view of human possibilities that is decidedly optimistic.

The masses are the real heroes, while we ourselves are often childish and ignorant, and without this understanding it is impossible to acquire even the most rudimentary knowledge. (Mao 1969, III, 12)

Post-Kantianism

Alfred North Whitehead famously wrote that the European philosophical tradition could be described as a series of footnotes to Plato. (1979, p. 39). It could be said with equal or greater justification that Western philosophy of the last 200 years has been a series of arguments with Immanuel Kant. Tom

Rockmore argues that “the main thinkers in the twentieth century are in dialogue with each other on the basis of a shared Kantian tradition, which they understand in different ways, often markedly so” (2006, p.19). Roger Scruton considers Kant to be “the greatest philosopher of modern times” (1995, p. 470). Quentin Meillassoux, on the other hand, refers to “the Kantian catastrophe within whose parameters we continue to operate” (2008, p. 125).

Kant first expounded his ideas on epistemology in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, and his theory has since become known as Critical Theory. Almost every competing school in the Western tradition uses Critical Theory, at least as a starting point, for their own theories of epistemology. One philosophical tradition that consistently falls afoul of Critical Theory is Scientific Marxism, because it is accused of espousing a pre-Critical theory of knowledge, in particular a theory of knowledge as simple reflection.

One of the cornerstones of Scientific Marxism is a profound appreciation of Hegel and, consequently, of Kant. This appreciation, especially in the case of Kant, is far from uncritical, but Marx and Engels were steeped in the tradition of the philosophy of German Idealism, so it should be surprising that Engels in particular is so often accused of espousing the primitive theory of knowledge known as simple reflection (Manicas 1999, p. 71).⁹ The fact is, the Marxist theory of knowledge is not pre-Critical but post-Critical. In particular, Marxist theory completed the project of German Idealism by freeing itself of the “contemplationist” bias that permeated modern philosophy from Descartes to Kant (and beyond). It accomplished this – and moved from philosophical idealism

⁹ Marx is often let off the hook here. It has become trendy to set off Marx against Engels, as if they were not life-long collaborators who constantly reviewed and contributed to each other’s work. For a detailed refutation – both biographical and textual – of this trend, see John Rees’s article “Engels’ Marxism” (Rees 1994).

to dialectical materialism – by recognising the decisive role of social practice in cognition.

This is not to downplay the importance of what Kant called his “Copernican Revolution”. Clearly something that still plays such a major role in philosophical debate more than 200 years after it was first published is of great importance. And its reach goes beyond philosophy to the arts and sciences and our general cultural outlook. Einstein’s theory of relativity, Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, and Thomas Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* all would have been literally unthinkable without a Kantian framework. And of course, without Kant’s Copernican Revolution there would have been no Hegel or Marx. Naturally, from a Marxist – or a Hegelian – perspective, these ideas were in the air and somebody else would have come up with them, but it was Kant who did, and a serious discussion of Marxism in Western philosophy must begin with him.

The Copernican Revolution in philosophy consisted essentially of this: Kant combined the traditions of rationalism and empiricism to argue that perception is a two-way process:

There can be no doubt whatever that all our cognition begins with experience... But although all our cognition commences *with* experience, yet it does not on that account arise *from* experience. (1998, A1 / B1)

Kant argued that this dual process happened at two levels of cognition: perception and understanding. At the first level: on the one hand, raw data is given to the intuition through the senses, while on the other hand, the intuition imposes the forms of time and space on sense data to organize them into perceptions. The

same dichotomy exists at the second level of cognition. The perceptions of the intuition are given to the understanding, and the understanding imposes logical categories of thought on these perceptions.

An example of this second level would be the category of causation. Kant believed that the philosopher David Hume had made a convincing case for his argument that it is impossible to prove a causal relationship between any two *particular* events: the best that can be shown is that the two events are always associated with each other. Nevertheless, Kant argued that a principle of temporal sequence was hardwired into the way we experience the world and therefore a *general* principle of causation can be inferred.

Thus if wax that was previously firm melts, I can cognize *a priori* that *something* must have preceded (e.g., the warmth of the sun), on which this has followed in accordance with a constant law, though without experience, to be sure, I could **determinately** cognize neither the cause from the effect nor the effect from the cause *a priori* and without instruction from experience. He [Hume] therefore falsely inferred from the contingency of our determination **in accordance with the law** the contingency of **the law** itself. (1998, A766/B794)

Kant's position is often described as agnosticism (Oliver p. 44; Sellars p. 647). On the one hand, he argues, there is no appearance without immediate intuition of objects; therefore appearance is not mere illusion. On the other hand, it is not possible to think of appearances occurring outside of time and space, and since these forms are imposed by the thinking subject, it is not possible to know

things-in-themselves, i.e., it is not possible to know the inner properties of objects independent of what we make of them.

Kant aimed at achieving two somewhat paradoxical goals with his system. He wanted to make the world safe for both science and religion (Brook 2008). On the one hand, he defended the validity of science and causality in the phenomenal world of appearances. On the other hand, he argued that the noumenal world of things-in-themselves is in principle unknowable and not necessarily subject to the laws of causality. Kant saw the concept of free will as incompatible with determinism, but the noumenal world could offer a safe haven to free will (A444-445, B472-473). S. Korner describes the argument like this:

The third antinomy concerns the question whether there is or is not freedom, i.e., are there or are there not uncaused causes? It is resolved by showing that the thesis – that all phenomena are subject to “causality according to laws of nature” – is compatible with the antithesis that a different kind of causality, allowing of uncaused causes, exists for noumena or things-in-themselves. (Korner 1990, pp. 117, 118)

Quentin Meillassoux points out that there is a paradox here which Kant clearly did not foresee. Kant was a devout Christian writing at the culmination of a sustained attack by the Enlightenment on any claim that religion might make of being rationally provable. He had defended religion by moving it into the realm of things-in-themselves, where science and causality held no sway. Or, as Kant put it himself, “Thus I had to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*” (Kant 1998, Bxxx). But in succeeding, he had created a space not for Christianity alone,

but for any brand of faith or superstition. According to Meillassoux, “The destruction of the metaphysical rationalization of Christian theology has resulted in a generalized becoming-religious of thought, viz. in a fideism of any belief whatsoever” (2008, p. 46).

If the full implications of this took time to become manifest, the immediate reaction to Kant’s critique was to recognize it as a major breakthrough, while at the same time, taking the concept of a barrier between the phenomenal and the noumenal world as a challenge to be overcome.

Kant’s realism of the thing-in-itself served as a target for all the philosophers of German idealism. For in condemning all metaphysics of the object... the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and, especially, the “Transcendental Dialectic” sowed the seed of a quite different metaphysics, a metaphysics of the subject. (Hyppolite 1974, p. 144)

Kant’s whole problematic took place inside the paradigm of the philosopher as the solitary individual confronting the object of contemplation. A.J. Grayling refers to this as “‘the Cartesian super-premiss’, namely, the belief that the right starting-place for inquiry is among the contents of an individual mind” (Grayling 1995, p. 536).

Hegel made two fundamental criticisms of this paradigm:

1. The individual does not exist. The individual, as a self-contained atomic unit, is a philosophical fiction. The individual is better understood as a nodal point in a social medium. Here Hegel is simply taking Kant’s

discovery of the two-way process of perception and developing its social implication.

2. The object does not exist. Everything that happens, happens within consciousness. There is no outside.

Hegel attempts to prove these points in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Hegel's Phenomenology

Hegel begins the *Phenomenology* by rejecting the foundational approach to knowledge that had been adopted in one way or another by philosophers from Descartes to Kant. The ground for rejection is its circularity: it assumes the reliability of reason in order to use reason as an instrument for examining the reliability of reason. But not only does this “take for granted certain ideas about cognition as an *instrument* and as a *medium*,” it also “assumes that there is a *difference between ourselves and this cognition*” (1977, p. 47). It is just this supposed difference that Hegel examines in the *Phenomenology*. He begins by making the very assumption that he intends to disprove, i.e., that the object of cognition is both related to the subject and distinct from it, and then he chooses for the object of cognition – cognition itself. Thus, “Consciousness provides its own criterion from within itself, so that the investigation becomes a comparison of consciousness with itself” (p. 53).

Having set out the phenomena to be studied, he then proceeds by exposing the contradictions inherent in the “everyday” understanding of the nature of the phenomena. The opening chapters of the *Phenomenology* to a large extent retrace Kant's argument that perception is a two-way process. Hegel examines the

contents of an individual mind at its most basic level: sense certainty – but what we think of as sense certainty is found to contain more than just direct sensory input, because without universals to use as organising principles for the input, any and all sense of objects must disappear. “So it is in fact the universal that is the true [content] of sense-certainty” (p. 60). Consequently, the idea that sense certainty is some kind of pure, unmediated experience is shown to be inherently contradictory. Sense certainty (without universals) is judged to be only a partial description of the basic state of natural consciousness, and so the examination moves up to the next level: perception.

In the following two chapters, perception and then understanding are subjected to the same process with similar results. By the end of the opening chapters, Hegel has not eliminated the inherent contradictions involved in trying to think the independence of the object; rather, he has demonstrated that both sides of the contradiction are opposed moments within the consciousness of the subject, and he has laid the groundwork for the rest of the *Phenomenology*: a study of the movement involved in “the cognition of *what consciousness knows in knowing itself*.” (p. 103).

Hegel has not discovered – or even looked for – some unassailable point from which a bridge to the “outside” world could be constructed. Rather, the immanent logic of everyday consciousness has been shown to require a social context because consciousness is literally unthinkable without it: the subjective world of objects that we manipulate and respond to must be constructed using empirical knowledge and universal concepts that are manifestly social in origin.¹⁰

¹⁰ Terry Pinkard gives an account of this section of the *Phenomenology* that focuses particularly on its social implications: “Hegel’s second goal therefore in the three introductory sections is to show that such a picture also *on its own terms* fails to fulfil the goals that it sets for itself. Thus, by showing how the three available candidates for a kind of knowledge that would be

A number of points follow from this:

- Sensuous human activity is the basis for knowledge. (Although this conception was developed within an idealist framework, it laid the basis for Marx's and Engels' dialectical materialism.)
- Self-consciousness is a social phenomena and not purely individual.
- There is an identity (within the "continuum" of human activity) between thought and being. Everything we "know" to be happening "in reality" is mediated through our consciousness. (Therefore, the question as to whether dialectics applies to movement "in reality" or just to the way we think about it has no meaning. We can only think about reality in the way we think about it.)
- Social institutions and activity, including labour, its forms of organisation and its tools, are part of the developing consciousness of the human species.

Thus, a totality of sorts has been defined and developed: it is the continuum of human activity in all its theoretical and practical spheres. And a method has been established, based on that totality. For Hegel, truth is to be found, ultimately, only in the whole. Consequently, any individual object or concept is defined as much by what it is not as by what it is. Hegel argues that "the exposition of the untrue consciousness in its untruth is not merely a *negative* procedure... For it is only when it is taken as the result of that from which it emerges, that it is, in fact, the true result; in that case it is itself a *determinate* nothingness, one which has a

independent of social practice break down, Hegel attempts to show how the view of ourselves as "metaphysical represententers" of the world undermines itself and leads to the view of ourselves as organisms engaged in certain forms of historically mediated social practices whose general goal is the affirmation for ourselves that what we have historically come to *take* as true and right *really* is true and right" (1994, p. 21).

content” (pp. 50, 51). This new content then becomes an object for consciousness, but is also found to have its limit, its untruth... and so the series continues.

However, as an attempt to break through the barrier between the phenomenal world and the Kantian world of things-in-themselves, the *Phenomenology* has to be counted a failure. A beginning was made from inside consciousness, and we are still inside consciousness. The most basic criticism to be made of the totality that Hegel establishes in the *Phenomenology* (as opposed to the Totality that Hegel believes he has established) is that it is not total. The continuum of human consciousness and activity on which all the developments of the *Phenomenology* are based has an outside which is still irrevocably outside.

Marxism and Totality

This is the critique of Hegel made by Marx and Engels. It is not a return to Kant – far from it – but it does in one respect occupy a position midway between Kant and Hegel. On the one hand, Marx and Engels recognize that there is an “outside” to human society and consciousness. Jurgen Habermas describes this as “the autonomy of nature and the remainder of complete otherness that is lodged in its facticity... No matter how far our power of technical control over nature is extended, nature retains a substantial core that does not reveal itself to us” (1972, p. 33).

But this “outside” is fundamentally different from the noumenal world in Kant’s philosophy. The Kantian thing-in-itself is in principle unknowable. In Kant’s view, the forms of time and space that we use to organise our perceptions are also impenetrable barriers between us and things-in-themseves. However, the Marxian facticity, or nature-in-itself, is inexhaustible but not unknowable, and the

human continuum is capable not only of digesting more and more, but also of creating completely new faculties and types of “digestion”. The self-creation of humanity is fed by this process of digestion. Nature-in-itself is an inexhaustible food supply and our stomachs are capable of unlimited growth.

The Marxist concept of totality operates always in the shadow of its other: facticity, nature-in-itself, the real that is forever just outside of the totality of all human activity. Unlike the Hegelian concept of Totality, it does not deny the existence of this “outside”, but unlike the Kantian concept of the *thing-in-itself*, it does not mystify this “outside” with a claim of unknowability – or indeed with any other claim about its nature. The essential nature of the outside is irrelevant precisely because it is outside. No conclusions of any sort can be drawn from speculation as to its nature – as long as it remains outside. As Marx says in the second of his *Theses on Feuerbach*, “It is in practice that man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking. The dispute over the reality or unreality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question” (Engels 1976b, p. 61).

It is the role of practice in creating knowledge that makes Marxism post-Critical, because the theory/practice contradiction encompasses the contemplationist paradigm of Kant. When Marx writes, “The ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought” (Marx 2007, p. 25), both elements of the Kantian two-way process are there – sensation and the formal categories of the thought – but this is only the first step in the cycle of knowledge. If left at this point, Kant’s claim that things-in-themselves are unknowable is unassailable. It is the test of practice that breaks through the barrier into the unknown and appropriates it as knowledge.

A comparison with hermeneutics is useful here in drawing out the distinction between Critical and post-Critical thinking. Hans-Georg Gadamer famously wrote, “*Being that can be understood is language...* Thus we speak not only of a language of art but also of a language of nature – in short, of any language that things have” (2004, p. 470).

Given a sufficiently broad interpretation of “language” this statement is almost a tautology. But the statement seems to imply that the only way one can increase one’s understanding of being is by engaging in acts of language. Hence, the hermeneutic circle, going endlessly back and forth between text and interpretation. There is no way to break through the Kantian barrier.

The power of hermeneutics is its ability to mine the almost unlimited complexity and contradiction of human communication, and in my view Gadamer’s criticism of Habermas is well made:

Habermas and many others...follow the old Enlightenment slogan: to dissolve obsolete prejudices and overcome social privileges through thought and reflection. In this context Habermas makes the fundamental supposition of a “*contrafactual agreement*”. On my side, by contrast, there is a deep scepticism about the fantastic overestimation of reason by comparison to the affections that motivate the human mind. (2004, p. 570)

However, in the hermeneutic circle, the metaphor of text – or nature as text – takes the place of nature-in-itself in the Marxist spiral of practice/theory/practice. The problem is this: text is relatively fixed, even though interpretations of it can change its meaning in many ways (possibly infinitely many), whereas Marxist

nature-in-itself, as something to be acted upon, transformed, *and then* reinterpreted, is the very opposite of fixed. Hence the hermeneutical *circle* vs. the Marxist *spiral*.

Put another way, text as a metaphor for nature only works if you approach the act of interpretation with a printing press and a book of matches. In the post-Critical epistemology of Marxism, objective knowledge is not a superior form of contemplation or interpretation, but an act of appropriation, an act of digestion. To know the taste of a pear, you must eat it. Ultimately, the test of truth is survival. This gets back to Nietzsche again. It is not only pears that are eaten in the jungle.

Mao's Further Development of Dialectics

Influence of Traditional Chinese Philosophy

The dialectical materialist philosophical currents developing in China today do not result from taking over and reforming our own philosophical heritage, but from the study of Marxism-Leninism. However, if we wish to ensure that dialectical materialist thought shall penetrate profoundly in China and continue to develop, and shall moreover give firm direction to the Chinese revolution and lead it to final victory in the future, then we must struggle with all the old and rotten philosophical theories existing in China on the ideological front throughout the whole country, raise the flag of criticism and in this way liquidate the philosophical heritage of ancient China. Only thus we can attain our goal. (Mao 2009)

The above statement is taken from Mao's lecture notes on Dialectical Materialism, 1938. However, China has a rich dialectical tradition, and it would be surprising if this had no effect on the way that Marxist dialectical materialism was understood and practiced by Mao. Certainly Mao was greatly influenced by classical Chinese literature. A table of references from the first four volumes of selected works shows that they shared equal billing with the classic works of Marxism-Leninism (Holubnychy 1964, p. 16).

Percentage of different types of references in Mao's Selected Works, Vol. I-IV

| | |
|---|-------------|
| Confucian and Neo-Confucian writings | 22% |
| Taoist and Mohist writings | 12% |
| Folklore legends, pure <i>belles lettres</i> | 13% |
| Other Chinese and foreign writers, unclassified | 7% |
| Marx and Engels | 4% |
| Lenin | 18% |
| Stalin | 24% |
| Total | 100% |

But the fact that Mao was steeped in traditional Chinese literature and philosophy does not necessarily mean that their influence was straightforward. My own personal cultural context is that of Roman Catholicism. References to the Bible, the Pope, paedophilia and all the usual cultural artefacts of Catholic culture abound in my prose and poetry. But they appear more often as something to kick against than as something to follow. Mao's relationship to Chinese culture was

characterized by struggle as well as unity. Arguably, struggle was the principal aspect.

Consider the following two passages. First, a passage from a Taoist text by Zhuangzi:

There is a limit to our life, but there is no limit to knowledge. To pursue what is unlimited with what is limited is a perilous thing. When, knowing this, we still seek to increase our knowledge, we are simply placing ourselves in peril. (Prazniak 1997, p. 48)

Now consider this similar passage from a letter Mao wrote in 1915:

Men's spirits are limited, while those things which exhaust the spirit are limitless. One cannot rely on the limited to control the limitless. The sages knew this and renewed their spirits through these activities [manual labour and aesthetic education], thus making themselves inexhaustible. (Prazniak 1997, p. 47)

The narrative in Mao's letter is parallel to the classical text, but subverted to point in the opposite direction, towards resistance and struggle. In my view, the evidence, both biographical and textual, shows that Mao had primarily a struggle relationship to traditional Chinese philosophy.

It is the struggle aspect that Chensan Sian fails to consider in his account of Chinese dialectics. He writes:

“If expressed in one phrase, then, *tongbian* is ‘continuity through change between any correlative pairing... The philosophy of *tongbian* had tremendous significance in the discourse of ‘dialectical materialism’ or *bianzheng weiwu zhuyi*, and it facilitated reading Marxist ‘dialectics’ into a worldview of continuity among all things or events.” (p. 23, p. 29)

He argues that for Mao, dialectical materialism is “about continuity” (158). He points out that many, including Stuart Schram (Schram 1989, p. 66), consider Mao’s development of the principal contradiction and the principal aspect of a contradiction to be his most notable contribution to dialectics, and in his opinion “these concepts are all meant in terms of seeking continuity” (Tian 2005, p. 158).

But this is simply not the case. *On Contradiction* stressed that balance and complementarity were conditional and temporary while struggle and change were absolute. In the Cultural Revolution, Mao initiated a struggle promoting the revolutionary line of “one divides into two” as against the reactionary line of “two combines into one”. As the Chinese philosopher Chang Tung-sun, wrote:

It is true that Marxism [like Chinese dialectical logic] has done away with the law of identity, and has advocated the law of opposition. . . . But its difference from Chinese thought lies in the fact that while Marxism puts emphasis on opposition and thus class struggle, Chinese thought puts emphasis on the result or adjustment of such an opposition. . . . In contradistinction to the Chinese logic of correlation, the Marxian type of logic may be called the “logic of opposition.” (quoted in Holubnychy 1964)

Marxist dialectics stresses struggle and breaks in continuity. If anything, this is even truer of Mao's take on dialectics. On the other hand, it is fair to say that context matters, and it is a basic dialectical principle that the ideas and culture you rebel against leave their stamp, i.e., the negation of a given national culture is a determinate negation. Dialectics permeates traditional Chinese culture, although it is for the most part dialectical idealism (Chin 1979, p. 39). As Holubnychy points out, "Mao's view of the structure of contradictions is more complex than anything proposed in this field heretofore" (p. 29). This must be attributable in part to the dialectical side of Chinese culture.

In China's traditional culture, as in everything else, one divides into two. This principle applies to Chinese culture itself: there is a materialist side to Chinese traditions as well as an idealist side. Mao initiated a struggle against the ideas of Confucius during the Cultural Revolution, but on the other hand, "Mao's military strategies are dependent on the 2500 year old Chinese traditions of guerrilla warfare" (Freiberg 1977). According to Holubnychy (p. 14), Mao makes only one explicit reference to the Taoist philosopher Lao Tsu. On the other hand, he refers frequently to "Taoist dialectics dealing with essentially military strategies, found in *Sunzi (Sun Tsu)'s Art of War*" (Kang 1997, p. 246).

Although Taoism overall would be characterized as dialectical idealism (Chin 1979, p. 206), Taoist writing on the art of war necessarily had to be fairly materialist in order to be useful to real-life generals. There is also a link historically between Taoist military writing and the peasant uprisings, given that a basic Taoist principle is "in a conflict between opposites, the lower will overcome the higher" (Lau 1958, p. 345). So this seems to be a more materialist area of

Chinese traditional philosophy that Mao drew on to enrich his thinking, but it seems to be more a question of Mao seeking out areas of Chinese culture that were in some ways dialectical materialist, rather than traditional culture drawing him away from Marxism.

The Laws of Dialectical Materialism before Mao

As is well known, Marx never wrote a systematic treatment of dialectics. The meaning of dialectics comes through in his writing, first of all in its application to particular problems, and secondly in critical comments made about other writers such as Hegel and Feuerbach. Engels is the first to write a summary of the general laws of dialectics. He gives the following account in the *Dialectics of Nature*:

It is, therefore, from the history of nature and human society that the laws of dialectics are abstracted. For they are nothing but the most general laws of these two aspects of historical development, as well as of thought itself.

And indeed they can be reduced in the main to three:

The law of the transformation of quantity into quality and *vice versa*;

The law of the interpenetration of opposites;

The law of the negation of the negation. (1954, p. 83)

Lenin's systematic study of dialectics in Hegel's *Logic* did not become well known until after his death, but it is widely agreed that his study of Hegel in Switzerland in the "down-time" before the October Revolution had a big impact on his later work. Lenin's reading of Hegel, as shown in his *Philosophical*

Notebooks, homes in on one central concept of materialist dialectics, the unity of opposites. He sums up the elements of dialectics in Hegel as the following:

- 1) The determination of the concept out of itself [the thing *itself* must be considered in its relations and in its development];
- 2) the contradictory nature of the thing itself (*das Andere seiner*: the other of itself), the contradictory forces and tendencies in each phenomenon;
- 3) the union of analysis and synthesis.(1972a, XXXVIII, 221)

He follows this with a sixteen-point elaboration that includes concepts like spiral development, the negation of the negation and the transformation of quantity into quality (I have tried to reproduce the formatting as exactly as possible. All punctuation, including brackets, are his.):

1. the *objectivity* of consideration (not examples, not divergences, but the Thing-in-itself)
2. the entire totality of the manifold *relations* of this thing to others.
3. the *development* of this thing, (phenomenon, respectively), its own movement, its own life,
4. the internally contradictory *tendencies* (and sides) in this thing.
5. the thing (phenomenon, etc.) as the sum *and*

#

unity of opposites
6. the *struggle*, respectively unfolding, of these opposites, contradictory strivings, etc.

7. the union of analysis and synthesis – the break-down of the separate parts and the totality, the summation of these parts.
8. the relations of each thing (phenomenon, etc.) are not only manifold, but general, universal. Each thing (phenomenon, process, etc.) is connected with *every other*.
9. not only the unity of opposites, but *the transitions of every* determination, quality, feature, side, property into every other [into its opposite?].
10. the endless process of the discovery of *new* sides, relations, etc.
11. the endless process of the deepening of man's knowledge of the thing, of phenomena, processes, etc., from appearance to essence and from less profound to more profound essence.
12. from co-existence to causality and from one form of connection and reciprocal dependence to another, deeper, more general form.
13. the repetition at a higher stage of certain features, properties, etc., of the lower and
14. the apparent return to the old (negation of the negation).
15. the struggle of content with form and conversely. The throwing off of the form, the transformation of the content.
16. the transition of quantity into quality and vice versa. ((15 and 16 are examples of 9)) (XXXVIII, 221-223)

He then boils all this down to the following essential principle:

In brief, dialectics can be defined as the doctrine of the unity of opposites. This embodies the essence of dialectics, but it requires explanations and development. (XXXVIII, 223)

It is this essential principle, combined with the importance of situating any analysis within the totality of human social practice, that Lenin focuses on in the essay later in the notebook, "On the Question of Dialectics".

Mao had access to two portions of Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*, which were available in Chinese as separate brochures during the time when he wrote the first drafts of *On Practice* and *On Contradiction* (Holubnychy 1964, p. 11). He also had access to some basic works on dialectical materialism written by or about philosophers in the Soviet Union that referred to Lenin's notebooks (Knight 1997, pp. 93-97). Two writers of particular importance in this respect were Abram Deborin and Mark Mitin.

Deborin, following Lenin, treated the law of the unity of opposites as the fundamental law of dialectics (Knight 1997, p. 95), but he maintained that contradiction did not appear at the beginning of a process and only arose when the process had reached a certain stage. By the time of *On Contradiction*, Deborin had fallen out of favour in the Soviet Union and Mao seems to be aware of Deborin only through the criticism of other writers.

As can be seen from the articles written by Soviet philosophers criticizing it, the Deborin school maintains that contradiction appears not at the inception of a process but only when it has developed to a certain stage. If this were the case, then the cause of the development of the process before

that stage would be external and not internal. Deborin thus reverts to the metaphysical theories of external causality and of mechanism. (Mao 1969, I, 318)

Mark Mitin became “the preeminent spokesperson for Soviet philosophy after the fall of Deborin” (Knight 1997, p. 93). According to Knight (p. 96), Mao had access to Mitin’s text, *Dialectical Materialism*, and made great use of it in preparing his own writing on the subject.

Mitin also maintained that the unity of opposites was “the most universal law of the objective world and of cognition” (Mitin, quoted in Knight 1997, p. 96). According to Knight (p. 97), Mitin and his colleagues argued that the unity of opposites describes the ontological basis for change, and the other two of Engels’ laws, the transformation of quantity into quality and the negation of the negation, described the process of change. Of particular interest is Mitin’s line on the negation of the negation, i.e., that it explained “the periodicity of the process of change (why it occurs in leaps) and the reasons *why change is not random but progressive* (italics mine).” Mao will criticise this line – that change is necessarily progressive – in his later work.

Mitin also distinguished, following Lenin, between antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions (Mitin 1931). It is probably in Mitin that Mao found the quote from Lenin on this distinction that appeared in *On Contradiction* and that was much further developed in *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions*.

Stalin’s *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* originally appeared as a chapter in *The History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolshevik)* in

1938. In it, Stalin abandons Lenin's formulation (and Engels') and lists the principal features of the Marxist dialectical method as the following:

- Nature Connected and Determined
- Nature is a State of Continuous Motion and Change
- Natural Quantitative Change Leads to Qualitative Change
- Contradictions Inherent in Nature (Stalin 1976a, pp.837-839)

Although it seems certain that Mao had access to Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* at least by the time of his revisions of *On Contradiction* and *On Practice* in the 1950s, Mao makes no reference to it or any other work by Stalin relating to philosophy (Holubnychy 1964, p. 13), except in later years, to criticise it.

Mao's Critique

The difference between dialectics in Mao's *On Contradiction* and dialectics in earlier Marxist-Leninist work is made explicit in Mao's later work, including *Talk on Questions of Philosophy* in 1964 and his speech on philosophy at Hangchow, Dec. 21, 1965. Mao criticised concepts that had been put forward as general or universal laws of dialectics:

- The law of the transformation of quantity into quality and *vice versa*
- The law of the negation of the negation
- Nature connected and determined
- The concept of synthesis (*aufhebung* in Hegel) as it had been frequently used in the dialectics of the past

His criticism of the law of the transformation of quantity into quality was the relatively minor point that it was merely a particular example of the identity and struggle of opposites, but his criticism of the negation of the negation was more substantial.

Engels talked about the three categories, but as for me I don't believe in two of those categories. (The unity of opposites is the most basic law, the transformation of quality and quantity into one another is the unity of the opposites quality and quantity, and the negation of the negation does not exist at all.) The juxtaposition, on the same level, of the transformation of quality and quantity into one another, the negation of the negation, and the law of the unity of opposites is "triplism", not monism. The most basic thing is the unity of opposites. The transformation of quality and quantity into one another is the unity of the opposites quality and quantity. There is no such thing as the negation of the negation. Affirmation, negation, affirmation, negation... in the development of things, every link in the chain of events is both affirmation and negation. Slave-holding society negated primitive society, but with reference to feudal society it constituted, in turn, the affirmation. Feudal society constituted the negation in relation to slave-holding society but it was in turn the affirmation with reference to capitalist society. Capitalist society was the negation in relation to feudal society, but it is, in turn, the affirmation in relation to socialist society. (Mao 1975, p. 226)

Nick Knight, in a study of Mao's philosophy texts, argued that as concerns the term "negation of the negation", not too much weight should be given to this quote. He points to the fact that nowhere else (at least in areas known to Western scholarship) does Mao explicitly repudiate the law of negation of the negation, and there are numerous earlier passages where he uses the term himself – or a similar term (Mao and Knight 1990, pp. 18-24).

As far as the precise term, "negation of the negation", Mao claims it to be a basic law of dialectics only in the very early texts: *Lecture Notes on Dialectical Materialism* and in parts of the pre-liberation version of *On Contradiction* that were edited out before publication in the 1952 edition. Other references to the term, as documented by Nick Night, show Mao using the term as an analytical tool. As far as similar terms, Nick Knight argues that Mao's use of the term "affirmation and negation" in the above passage and elsewhere is "merely a change in title, for the substance of the concept remains unchanged" (Mao and Knight 1990, p. 23).

In a handbook on Marxist philosophy prepared by the Communist Party of India (ML)(PW), a similar claim is made concerning this passage: "What Engels said about the dialectical nature of negation [i.e., negation of the negation], and the negation and affirmation as two sides of negation explained by Mao are in essence [the] same" (CPI[MI][PW] 2002, p. 99).

But the evidence of the text seems to clearly refute this interpretation. Mao explicitly rejects the term "negation of the negation" while in the same passage upholding and using "affirmation and negation". In my view, Mao has two reasons for rejecting the "three laws" of dialectics. The first is stated clearly in that passage. There is only one basic law of motion: the unity of opposites. The

juxtaposition of the other two laws “on the same level” is “triplism” not monism. Paired opposites, such as quantity and quality, and affirmation and negation, are particular cases of the general law.

In his speech on philosophy at Hangchow in the following year, he puts forward the same concept:

It used to be said that there were three great laws of dialectics, then Stalin said that there were four. In my view there is only one basic law and that is the law of contradiction. Quality and quantity, positive and negative, external appearance and essence, content and form, necessity and freedom, possibility and reality, etc., are all cases of the unity of opposites.(1965)

The second reason for abandoning the concept of the negation of the negation is that it is crucial in breaking the links with Hegelian idealism. If the negation of the negation is a universal law, then development must be continuous in an unbroken chain, leading from the lower to the higher until all things are connected in a universal Totality. But as Mao points out, “What indissoluble ties are there in this world? Things may be tied, but in the end they must be severed. There is nothing which cannot be severed” (1975, p. 225).

This is directly related to Mao’s criticism of the use – or misuse – of the concept of synthesis. Synthesis or sublation (or *Aufhebung* in German), is taken from an old German word meaning “to kick upstairs”. It has a connotation of both preservation and destruction (Inwood 1992, p. 284). As it is used in Hegel, one or the other aspect can predominate, but they are both always there. In Maoist dialectics, the principle aspect is the destruction of the old in the process of the

creation of the new, and although bits of the old continue on in the new, they do not continue as an entity but as fragments to be absorbed:

What is synthesis? You have all witnessed how the two opposites, the Kuomintang and the Communist Party, were synthesized on the mainland. The synthesis took place like this: their armies came, and we devoured them, we ate them bite by bite. It was not a case of two combining into one as expounded by Yang Hsien-chen, it was not the synthesis of two peacefully coexisting opposites. (Mao 1975, p. 224)

However, Mao is not arguing that the resolution of contradictions is accomplished purely through destruction. In the speech at Hangchow, Mao elaborates the metaphor of digestion in more detail.

To synthesize the enemy is to eat him up. How did we synthesize the Guomindang? Did we not do it by taking enemy material and remoulding it? We did not kill prisoners, but released some of them and retained most of them to replenish our own armies. We took all the weapons, food and fodder and equipment of all kinds. Those we did not use we have '*aufgehoben*', to use a philosophical term, as in the case of people like Du Yuming. The process of eating is also one of analysis and synthesis. For example when eating crabs you eat the meat but not the shell. The stomach will absorb the nutritious part and get rid of the useless part. You are all foreign-style philosophers. I am a native style philosopher. Synthesizing the Guomindang means eating it up, absorbing most of it and eliminating a

small part. I've learnt this from Marx. Marx removed the shell of Hegel's philosophy and absorbed the useful inner part, transforming it into dialectical materialism. He absorbed Feuerbach's materialism and criticized his metaphysics. The heritage had always to be passed on. In his treatment of French utopian socialism and English political economy, Marx absorbed the good things and abandoned the bad. (1965)

Mao's use of the metaphor of digestion is not reserved solely for antagonistic contradiction. Rather, it is a metaphor that he finds useful for describing the process of synthesis in general, and it is one that he used well before the Cultural Revolution. In the following passage from *On New Democracy*, written in 1940, he uses it to describe the process of developing revolutionary culture in the liberated areas of China.

To nourish her own culture China needs to assimilate a good deal of foreign progressive culture, not enough of which was done in the past. We should assimilate whatever is useful to us today not only from the present-day socialist and new-democratic cultures but also from the earlier cultures of other nations, for example, from the culture of the various capitalist countries in the Age of Enlightenment. However, we should not gulp any of this foreign material down uncritically, but must treat it as we do our food – first chewing it, then submitting it to the working of the stomach and intestines with their juices and secretions, and separating it into nutriment to be absorbed and waste matter to be discarded – before it can nourish us. (Mao 1969, III, 380)

Is there anything new to Mao's concept of synthesis then, if he has been using the same metaphor from long before his *Talk on Questions of Philosophy* in 1965? Mao certainly seems to think so:

One thing eating another, big fish eating little fish, this is synthesis. It has never been put like this in books. I have never put it this way in my books either. (1975, p. 225)

Slavoj Žižek gives what I think is fair to call an "orientalist" interpretation of the above statement and the discussion of dialectics that follows:

One should remember that Mao is here talking to the inner circle of party ideologists. This is what accounts for the tone of sharing a secret not to be rendered public, as if Mao is divulging his "secret teaching". (2007b, does not appear in printed version)

A more parsimonious interpretation would have to consider the possibility that Mao was making a simple statement of fact, that this was a new formulation of the nature of synthesis, implied in previous writings but never explicitly stated. This interpretation would have the virtue of taking his explicit rejection of the negation of the negation to mean exactly what Mao claimed it meant: a rejection of this term as expressing a universal law of dialectics and replacing it with the more dialectical – in his view – concept of affirmation and negation as a particular case of the unity of opposites.

The rejection of the negation of the negation and the redefinition of synthesis can then be seen as the culmination of a process of stripping away excess baggage from the one universal law of dialectics, the law of contradiction. The rejection – as a universal law – of the transformation of quality and quantity into one another is another example of this stripping away. A further example is Mao's criticism of Stalin's concept of the interconnection of all things:

Stalin had a lot of metaphysical [ideas], and he taught many people to engage in metaphysics. In the *Short Course on the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolshevik)*, he said that Marxist dialectics had four basic characteristics. The first that he talked about was the relationship between things, as if all things were related for no reason. In fact, how are things related? The relationship is actually between the two aspects of a contradiction. In everything there are two aspects in opposition to each other. (1986, II, 185-186)

Here again, Mao is not denying interconnection but rejecting it as an absolute, something not itself subject to the law of contradiction.

The Hegelian idealist, John McTaggart, has an interesting observation that I think throws further light on the relationship of synthesis to totality and the negation of the negation. McTaggart argues that in *The Science of Logic*, the aspect of preservation gets stronger and the aspect of destruction gets weaker as the book goes on and as the negation of the negation leads closer and closer to the Absolute Idea (1922, sections 107-109). In Maoist dialectics, there is no absolute idea, and the negation of the negation is not a universal law leading inexorably

towards Totality. Consequently, there is no formula for the relative balance of destruction and preservation – it must be determined by condition, time and place. What is absolute is that the old thing is destroyed and a new thing arises out of the ashes of the old.

Slavoj Žižek argues that Mao's rejection of the negation of the negation was the fundamental flaw in his philosophy and that even Mao had to reintroduce it by the back door when he talked about unity-struggle-unity as a formula for resolving contradictions among the people (2007a, p. 187). There are two points to be made about this.

The first is that the formula unity-struggle-unity *is* about destruction, but it is not people who are to be destroyed – instead, reactionary ideas that stand in the way of a higher level unity must be destroyed. So the process that Mao is describing starts out with “the people” in overall unity but having some areas of disagreement. There is a struggle over the conflicting ideas that are causing this disunity, and the progressive ideas eventually win out over the reactionary ideas. Thus the people are able to create a higher level of unity based on the destruction of reactionary ideas.

The second and more general point is that Mao is not necessarily saying there are no developments that proceed in the form of a negation of a negation. He is saying that each and every contradiction has its own particularity and that the triadic structure is not universal. This is not necessarily such a big break with Engels as might appear, although there clearly is a difference. Engels describes the negation of the negation as an “extremely general, and for this very reason extremely far-reaching and important, law of development of nature, history, and thought” (1976a, p. 179). But when he discusses an actual example of the

negation of the negation – a grain of oat, sprouting, growing and producing many grains – he acknowledges that this chain of development can easily be broken, as for example when the grain is crushed and made into a loaf of bread.

Therefore, every kind of thing has its characteristic kind of way of being negated, of being negated in such a way that it gives rise to a development, and it is just the same with every kind of conception or idea. (1976a, p. 181)

In other words, the negation of the negation can be applicable to development in an ongoing process, one characterized by qualitative leaps in continuity rather than the complete destruction of a process and the beginning of a new one. This has implications that go beyond a field of oats versus a loaf of bread. If capitalism is the negation of feudalism and communism is the negation of capitalism, then communism would be the negation of the negation of feudalism. And if the negation of the negation is a universal law of dialectics, then the Communist revolution is inevitable.

But it is not inevitable. As Mao points out in a passage that Žižek considers to be flavoured with “Gnostic spirituality”, another possible outcome instead of communism as negation of the negation is the complete destruction of the planet earth (Žižek 2007b). Arguably, the destruction of the planet would be the negation of the negation in some larger process of change, but the point is this: if there is no Totality, then there is always an outside to any process, and consequently, no process has an inevitable development.

Totality as Framing

In Marx... There is no indivisible genetic Totality, but many totalities. –

Jean Hyppolite (1969, p. viii, ix)

If a problem cannot be solved, enlarge it. — Dwight D. Eisenhower

The concept of totality is not developed systematically in *On Contradiction*. Mao deals with it only in terms of opposites. That is to say, he warns against one-sidedness, which he describes mainly in terms of failing to take account of both sides of a contradiction.

In studying a problem, we must shun subjectivity, one-sidedness and superficiality... To be one-sided means not to look at problems all-sidedly, for example, to understand only China but not Japan, only the Communist Party but not the Kuomintang, only the proletariat but not the bourgeoisie, only the peasants but not the landlords... In a word, it means not to understand the characteristics of both aspects of a contradiction. This is what we mean by looking at a problem one-sidedly. Or it may be called seeing the part but not the whole, seeing the trees but not the forest. (Mao 1969, I, 323)

But there is another aspect of totality that is alluded to here – but not analysed – when he refers to the part and the whole. How does one decide in a given situation what is the whole? Any decision about the limits of a situation will have

profound implications for the attempt to understand and change it. David Harvey lays out the problem clearly:

Setting boundaries with respect to space, time, scale, and environment then becomes a major strategic consideration in the development of concepts, abstractions, and theories. It is usually the case that any substantial change in these boundaries will radically change the nature of the concepts, abstractions, and theories.(1996, p. 53)

There is a famous passage in Lenin, where he riffs on some of the possible uses of a glass tumbler. Along with its normal use as a drinking vessel – it can be a missile, a paper weight, a receptacle for a captive butterfly, a valuable object with an artistic engraving or design – Lenin points out that any object has “an infinite number of ‘mediacities’ and inter-relationships with the rest of the world” and that “a ‘full’ definition of an object must include the whole of human experience” (1965, XXXII, 93, 94).¹¹ He goes on to say that of course it is impossible to do this in any literal sense, because the interconnections are infinite, but the attempt to be as inclusive as possible is a necessary antidote to the dangers of being one-sided.

But this begs the question. How far do you carry the attempt to “include the whole of human experience”? Also, there is an even more fundamental question: what is “the whole of human experience”?

In the previous section, we considered Mao’s criticism of Stalin’s first principle of dialectics, that all things are interconnected and mutually determined.

¹¹ It is worth noting the difference and similarity with Hegel here. For both, a true definition of any part requires reference to the whole, but for Lenin, the whole is the totality of human experience; for Hegel, the whole reaches beyond human experience to the Absolute.

Mao's criticism was that this statement left out the essential element of their interconnection: contradiction. In Maoist dialectics, the whole of human experience is connected by the struggle of opposites. Maoism has no general theory about the nature of these opposites other than that they move, that there is struggle.

Consequently, the whole of human experience is connected in different ways depending on what contradictions you are looking at. For example, in Neolithic times – although we are learning that there was a great deal more travel and communication than previously imagined – the human race was still mainly organized in separate pockets. The whole of human experience could refer to common biology or a shared presence on the planet, but the determining contradictions had more to do with pockets of humanity versus their local environment.

Today, we live in a world capitalist system and the whole of human experience is determined by the class contradiction. This creates a totality in a much stronger sense. Capitalism dominates the globe to such an extent that the road to any fundamental change in society must go through a resolution to this contradiction. Nevertheless, the forms of movement in human experience are unlimited, and so are the various contradictions that determine this movement. The resolution to any particular contradiction will have a variable relationship to other contradictions, including the class contradiction, depending on the particularity of the contradiction: there can be no general formula for how one contradiction relates to another.

For example, a Honda Motorcycle is a product of the world capitalist system, but you don't usually have to take that into account if you are just trying to fix an

old carburettor: the contradictions you are dealing with mainly have to do with the flow of air and fuel through small passageways. On the other hand, it could be the contradictions of world capitalism, in this case, say, inter-imperialist rivalry, that determine the possible resolution of the carburettor problem – if you were unable to get the necessary parts due to a trade war between the U.S. and Japan.

So, the scale or boundaries of a problem are determined by the particularity of the contradictions involved. However, in terms of imagining in a general, more spatialized way the infinitely overlapping contradictions of human experience, Alain Badiou's idea of set theory as ontology seems to me to be quite useful.¹² Ontology is discourse about being in general. As Hegel demonstrated in the opening chapter of *The Science of Logic*, being in general, shorn of all determinations, is conceptually identical to nothing in particular (1969, pp.82-108). Set theory is the branch of mathematics that deals with collections – of anything, i.e., of nothing in particular.

A set is any collection of elements. But the elements of any set are understood in set theory to be simply smaller sets, which are collections of still smaller sets, and so on... Any set can be collected into a larger set, which can be collected into still larger sets, and so on... Besides containing or being contained, sets can overlap. For example, the set of all Manchester United Fans would include many but not all residents of Manchester. Conversely, the set of all residents of Manchester would include many but not all Manchester United fans.

Since set theory is about the presentation of collections in general, rather than collections of any particular objects, Badiou argues that set theory is the presentation of presentation, in other words, that it is discourse about being, i.e.,

¹² I should point out here that I am making a considerably more limited use of set theory than Badiou. For me, set theory is essentially a metaphor. Badiou treats set theory – and mathematics in general – as a direct analogue of being (Badiou and others 2006, pp. 53, 54).

ontology. It is important to be clear that he is not saying set theory *is* being, but only that it is how we talk about being (Badiou 2005a, p. 8).

The rest of the book where he first develops these ideas in detail, *Being and Event*, is given over to drawing out the implications of set theory for an understanding of being and agency. Particularly important for our purposes is the way he uses Russell's paradox (which proves that a set of all sets is a logical impossibility) as a demonstration that there is no absolute Totality, no universal "one" that includes everything without contradiction (Badiou 2005a, pp. 40, 41). This is a fundamental part of Badiou's philosophy and greatly influenced by the Cultural Revolution's upholding of the line that "one divides into two" over the line that "two combines into one."

However, set theory has one fundamental limitation: if set theory is understood as discourse about being, it is discourse that is abstracted from movement. A set is a collection of static elements, each a further collection of static elements. Set theory can describe motion, but only as a set of points on a graph, where each point is just that – a point – abstracted from time and movement. Set theory cannot account for movement; it is the presentation of pure presence (and arguably, absence, but only as the null set).

On the other hand, this is not necessarily a weakness when set theory is combined with dialectics, because it is dialectics that accounts for movement as the unity of opposites. Set theory, as a presentation of presence, is a general theory of materialism. It states in a formal way that there is nothing that cannot be "digested" into a collection with anything else. Therefore, all things are one. But a set of all sets cannot be conceived without contradiction. Therefore, one divides into two.

It is tempting to write this as a formal equation:

Unity of opposites + set theory = dialectics + materialism.

But the equation would be misleading, because dialectics, as the unity and struggle of opposites, does all the heavy lifting. It accounts for both movement and stasis. When pursued to its limits, it is both a statement of dialectics and materialism. In fact, everything that is said in set theory – about interlocking and overlapping collections of elements – can be said, and said with more dynamism, by looking at any particular contradiction as a tangle of interlocking and overlapping contradictions.

In the final analysis, even contradiction, as the unity of opposites, is still nothing more than a working metaphor. But it has ontological status because it is stripped down to the absolute minimum possible conception of movement: presence and absence. Nevertheless, set theory is a useful working metaphor for thinking about the overlapping boundaries of multiple contradictions. It is particularly useful for thinking about the contradiction between inside and outside, which is so important in the dialectics of consciousness.

Theory of the Subject

A basic materialist analysis of subjectivity must begin with the premise that there can be no subjectivity without embodiment. A subject is a thing. The subject/object contradiction is a unity of opposites. The phenomenon identified by this contradiction is agency. The object is a thing considered as that which is acted upon by the subject. The subject is considered as that which is acting.

As a unity of opposites, the two aspects of the contradiction interpenetrate. That is to say, first of all, that they can transform into each other. Causality in a dialectical analysis moves in both directions. Secondly, each aspect is defined by the other. As Lewontin and Levin point out in *The Dialectical Biologist*

Organisms are both the subjects and the objects of evolution. They both make and are made by the environment and are thus actors in their own evolutionary history. (1985, p. 174)

Consciousness is the extreme pole of the general contradiction between organism and environment. Within any given process, causality is – or can be assumed to be for purposes of scientific investigation – absolute.¹³ But it is the nature of consciousness as reflexivity that it stands outside the process that created it. Any force that acts on a process from the outside appears as contingent from the inside. But inside and outside are relative terms. Any conscious understanding of a process that can be applied as an outside force is itself contained in a larger process. We can step outside of any particular process, develop an understanding of its causal interconnections, and use that understanding to manipulate, rather than be manipulated – but we can never step absolutely outside of the entire process.

According to Engels, this position was first clearly articulated by Hegel as a critique of Kant.

¹³ The rule of some form of causality is a necessary working hypothesis for science. It is not an ontological principle.

Hegel was the first to state the relation between freedom and necessity correctly. To him, freedom is the recognition of necessity. “Necessity is *blind only in so far as it is not understood.*” Freedom does not consist in an imaginary independence from natural laws, but in the knowledge of these laws and in the possibility which is thus given of systematically making them work towards definite ends. This holds good in relation both to the laws of external nature and to those which govern the bodily and mental existence of men themselves – two classes of laws which we can separate from each other at most only in thought but not in reality. (1976a, p. 144)

Freedom as conscious choice requires causality – not its suspension – because that is what gives agency its power to affect the future. But here a distinction has to be made between freedom as “conscious choice” and freedom as “free will”. Free will is essentially a judicial concept, whether the judge is a deity or a magistrate. If there is no break in the chain of causality, there can be no determination of guilt.¹⁴

As discussed in an earlier section, one of Kant’s objectives as a philosopher was to find a way out of this dilemma, hence his division of being into the causally determined world of appearances and the noumenal world where free will somehow survived. The following passage from Žižek describes in more detail how this “safe haven” for free will operated. (It also, incidentally, shows

¹⁴ “The texts say: the subject of law is the general and abstract expression of the human person; they also say: what makes this expression effective is the general capacity of man to be his own master, and therefore to be acquisitive. They say finally: that if this capacity is the mode of being a subject, it is because the subject can be/wants to be/consents to be/is free to be his own master and to be acquisitive” (Edelman, *Le Droit saisi par la Photographie*, quoted in Coward and Ellis 1977, p. 76).

how science – in this case genetics – progressively closes off the space for religious explanations of human behaviour.)

Faced with the enigma of how it is that we hold an evil person responsible for his deeds (although it is clear to us that the propensity for Evil is part of this person's "nature," that is to say, he cannot but "follow his nature" and to accomplish his deeds with an absolute necessity), Kant and Schelling postulate a nonphenomenal transcendental, atemporal act of primordial choice by means of which each of us, prior to his temporal bodily existence, chooses his eternal character. (2006, p. 246)

As a traditional Christian, Kant was forced into defending the concept of free will and the validity of God's judgement – and condemnation – of sin and sinners. But it is surprising that the three major French philosophers most associated with Maoism (who also happen to be atheists) would buy into this same problematic.

Sartre's response in *Being and Nothingness* is uncompromising and straightforward: if causality and free will are in conflict, so much the worse for causality.¹⁵

Either man is wholly determined (which is inadmissible, especially because a determined consciousness – i.e., a consciousness externally motivated – becomes itself pure exteriority and ceases to be consciousness) or else man is wholly free. (2003, 442)

¹⁵ It is important to point out here that the theories of Sartre, Althusser and Badiou on the question of freedom all went through a process of development. For each, I have chosen the point in their development that most clearly illustrates the distinction I wish to make.

Althusser, in his structuralist period, defends causality, but at the expense of denying the freedom of autonomous subjects.

History really is a “process without a Subject or Goal(s)”, where the given *circumstances* in which “men” act as subjects under the determination of social *relations* are the product of the *class struggle*. History therefore does not have a Subject, in the philosophical sense of the term, but a *motor*: that very class struggle. (1976, p. 99)

Alain Badiou's major criticism of Althusser was precisely on this point: that Althusser had failed to develop a theory of the subject (Badiou 2005c, p. 59). However, Badiou's solution to the problem is essentially a variation on Kant's noumenal world of things-in-themselves where the laws of causality do not operate. Revolutionary change – the event, in Badiou's terminology – arises from the edge of the void, from that which is in the situation but not of it. The subject is not able to precipitate the event or even foresee it, but they can freely choose to be faithful to the event once it has occurred (Badiou 2005a, pp. 178, 392-409).

These three different positions all have in common two things. First, they all accept in principle that there is an absolute contradiction between determinism and free agency. Second, consequently, they deny the role of *conscious* choice as a creative force in history. I emphasize “conscious” here, because Sartre and Badiou, in their different ways, posit choice as a factor in history, but it is not choice based on the subject's understanding of the social and economic laws that drive history (and that have in fact created the subject who is then reflecting back on those very laws).

The power and grandeur of subjectivity lies not in the suspension of causality, but in the capacity for conscious choice. Without causality – without some form of determination and consequence – one choice is as good as another, and no choice has any particular value. Another way of putting this is that causality is the link between theory and practice. To denigrate the importance of one necessarily denigrates the importance of the other.

Now, consider the following passage from Nietzsche:

If one now goes on to consider that, not only a book, but every action performed by a human being becomes in some way the cause of other actions, decisions, thoughts, that everything that happens is inextricably knotted to everything that will happen, one comes to recognize the existence of an actual *immortality*, that of motion: what has once moved is enclosed and eternalized in the total union of all being like an insect in amber. (1986, p. 97)

This is Nietzsche at his least dialectical, in the sense that this passage has more in common with Parmenides than Heraclitus. But actually, it has most in common with Thomas Aquinas describing God's eternal nature as the contemplation of all history as present in a single – out of time – instant.¹⁶

On the other hand, the passage could be considered Nietzsche at his most dialectical, because he is pushing determinism to its absolute logical extreme. This can only be done from the absolute outside, looking at history as an enclosed

¹⁶ [God's] knowledge, like his existence, is measured by eternity, which in one and the same instant encompasses all time; so his gaze is eternally focused on everything in time as on something present ...What happens in time is known by us in time, moment by moment, but by God in an eternal moment, above time (Aquinas 1991, pp. 41, 42).

instant, and considering the subject to be imprisoned on the inside. This is the view that Althusser takes:

Human, i.e., social individuals are *active* in history – as *agents* of the different social practices of the historical process of production and reproduction – that is a fact. But, considered as *agents*, human individuals are not “free” and “constitutive” subjects in the philosophical sense of these terms. They work in and through the determinations of the *forms of historical existence* of the social relations of production and reproduction. (1976, p. 95)

The criticism that Philippe Sollers, the founder of *Tel Quel*, made of Althusser’s position was that he failed to understand the dialectic between the inside and the outside:

The “process without a subject”... has nothing to do with Marxism. This argument avoids asking the real question: that of the dialectic between the subjective and the objective, between external and internal causality, and ultimately, all the questions relating to the *multiple* and *uneven* process of contradiction. The same applies to *practice*: it is impossible to underscore the importance of it in a “process without a subject”. (Sollers 1974)

The fact that there is no absolutely closed system and consequently always an outside (and an inside) to any process is the key to understanding the relationship between determinism and freedom in Marxist dialectics. The practice/theory spiral

is the movement back and forth between the inside and the outside. The subject is always, to use a phrase of Kristeva's, "a subject in process", divided across the inside and the outside, determined and determining.

Marxism is often criticised for harbouring an unresolved contradiction between economic determinism and political activism. But this charge is simply the result of the failure to understand the dialectic between inside and outside, between theory and practice.

According to Maoist theory (and Marxist theory in general before the 2nd International distorted it), capitalism is defined by the fundamental contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production. The principal aspect of this contradiction is the forces of production. That is to say, the driving force in human history is the application of human intelligence, creativity and social organisation to the problem of survival and reproduction. Human society develops increasingly more productive technology and forms of organisation. This development drives social organisation and culture in general. Science, technology and the arts take on a life of their own and react back on the development of production (Engels 1972, p. 294), but they all have their genesis in this struggle for material survival and the consequent development of the productive forces. When the relations of production – the system of property ownership and all the legal, political and social institutions concomitant with it – become obstacles to the further development of the productive forces, "an era of social revolution begins" (Marx 1976, p. 3).

But revolution is not "rational" in the sense of smooth, orderly and predictable. The contradiction between the forces and relations of production is itself a complex tangle of contradictions, and its movement is punctuated by

qualitative leaps and cataclysmic changes. In *For Marx*, Althusser used the term “overdetermination” to describe this complexity which nevertheless results in a determined event (1969, pp. 87-128). Although the actual outbreak of a revolutionary event can appear underdetermined or even contingent, the Scientific Marxist view has always been that contingency is an appearance that overlays a complex determined web.

There are no miracles in nature or history, but every abrupt turn in history, and this applies to every revolution, presents such a wealth of content, unfolds such unexpected and specific combinations of forms of struggle and alignment of forces of the contestants, that to the lay mind there is much that must appear miraculous. (Lenin 1964c, XXIII, 297)

So where does the role of the conscious element come into the process? There are two answers to this question, both correct, but on different scales.

On the large scale: a revolution requires conscious activity on a class-wide scale. The proletariat does not necessarily act as a conscious agent in the creation of a revolutionary situation, but given such a situation, a revolution will not happen without the subjective factor.

In the years leading up to the October Revolution in Russia, Lenin described the three major symptoms of a revolutionary situation as follows: (1) a crisis in the ruling class; (2) the suffering of the oppressed classes grows more acute than usual, and (3) a sharp spike in the activity and unrest of the masses (1964b, XXI, 213, 214).

But this is not enough to ensure a revolution. A revolutionary situation only means there is the possibility of a revolution. Lenin went on to give several examples of revolutionary situations that did not lead to revolution, and he drew the following conclusion:

It is not every revolutionary situation that gives rise to a revolution; revolution arises only out of a situation in which the above-mentioned objective changes are accompanied by a subjective change, namely, the ability of the revolutionary class to take revolutionary mass action strong enough to break (or dislocate) the old government, which never, not even in a period of crisis, “falls”, if it is not toppled over. (XXI, 214)

So a revolution is an example of a conscious choice, on a large scale, that changes the course of history. In this “grand scale view”, the revolutionary class steps outside the situation that created it, understands the need to revolutionize the relations of production and goes into battle to do so. In this grand scale view, the relations of production are standing in the way of progress and the development of the forces of production is an objective factor driving things forward to the moment of class conscious choice.

But the grand scale is merely an aggregation of innumerable actions on a smaller scale. The forces of production are not some disembodied Hegelian law. They are masses of individuals embedded in a web of nature, built environment and social relations, and engaging on a small scale in everyday activities that involve constant crossing over between the inside and the outside, the objective and the subjective, the determined and the determining.

This is the source of the Maoist maxim, “The people, and the people alone, are the motive force in the making of world history” (Mao 1969, III, 257). It is not an example of Maoist “voluntarism” as opposed to Marxist “determinism” but a simple statement of that which is the case, and an expression of the unity between the scientific and the partisan elements of Marxism.

The Party and the Mass Line

What is to be Done?

The motive and method of Communist revolutionary activism derives from this one dual premise: that the development of the forces of production is the engine which drives human history forward; and that this development reaches periodic crises which in the present day can be decisively resolved only by the conscious revolutionary activity of the principal productive force, the working class.

Lenin’s *What is to be Done* is the definitive summation of the theory and practice of communist activism based on these premises. The great issue in *What is to be Done?* is the role of revolutionary consciousness. Lenin attacks the idea that the workers movement will spontaneously develop socialist consciousness and argues that revolutionary political work must lead a broad political struggle against every form of oppression. This idea is developed in opposition to the rival theory of economism, which argued that the task of the Russian Social Democratic Party should focus exclusively, or at least mainly, on joining the workers in their practical economic struggles.

Lenin argues that the economic struggle is not the only – in fact, not even the most important – form of struggle that Communists should engage in (1973, p. 70). Lenin argues that Russian workers don't need the Social Democratic Party to tell them how to "add a kopek to a rouble." They are capable of waging struggle in their own world and have done so, with and without the aid of revolutionary parties (p. 44). Communists should unite with these struggles, but their main contribution as communist revolutionaries must be broader. Trade union struggle is inherently limited in scope, because it is about securing better conditions for the sale of labour power under capitalism. In addition, the ruling class constantly uses all its resources to define the terms of the struggle. Consequently, economic struggle on its own will not lead spontaneously to a radical challenge to the existence of the capitalist system in its entirety.

The working class, Lenin argued, if it is to take the lead in making Communist revolution, must have a broad knowledge of all classes and sections of society. More than this, the working class must take the lead in uniting all the oppressed in the fight against every form of injustice and exploitation. This is true for two reasons. The first is that knowledge comes from social practice. If the working class is to develop a general knowledge of society and all social classes, then it must be involved in the struggle to make progressive change in all areas of society.

The consciousness of the masses of the workers cannot be genuine class consciousness, unless the workers learn to observe from concrete, and above all from topical (current), political facts and events, *every* other social class and *all* the manifestations of the intellectual, ethical and

political life of these classes; unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist analysis and the materialist estimate of *all* aspects of the life and activity of *all* classes, strata and groups of the population. (p. 86)

The second reason goes back to Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*. The working class is the most revolutionary class because it can free itself – as a class – only by ending every form of exploitation. As Marx and Engels put it in *The Communist Manifesto*:

The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority. The proletariat, the lowest stratum of our present society, cannot stir, cannot raise itself up, without the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air... (p. 45)

Consequently, Marx and Engels wrote, communists everywhere must “support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things” (p. 76). *What is to be Done?* is a practical program for carrying out these priorities.

The Social-Democratic ideal should not be a trade union secretary, but *a tribune of the people*, able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it takes place, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects. (Lenin 1973, p. 86)

But it is not just the communist cadre that should be imbued with this spirit. The Party must make it their aim to foster this spirit in the working class as a whole. The Party must make it a priority to organize wide, striking and rapid exposures of every abuse in Czarist Russia.

When we do that (and we must and can do it), the most backward worker will understand, *or will feel* that the students and members of religious sects, the muzhiks and the authors are being abused and outraged by the very same dark forces that are oppressing and crushing him at every step of his life, and, feeling that, he himself will be filled with an irresistible desire to respond to these things.

(p. 87)

Going back to the discussion earlier in this paper of the fundamental contradiction and secondary contradictions, it should be clear now why – from a Communist perspective – it is not a viable strategy to fight only around the fundamental contradiction and leave other “less important” contradictions for later, because it is not just about winning on this or that contradiction but about developing consciousness of all oppression. “Turn fighters for one into fighters for all” is not just a slogan; it expresses an essential element of revolutionary communism.

What is to be Done has often been criticised for taking the line that the working class could not be trusted to make revolution and had to be controlled by a Party composed of an intellectual elite. The opposite is the case. Lenin is attacking the Economist tendency in the Russian Social Democratic Party for

patronizing the working class. It is here also that Lenin draws a link between Economism and Terrorism: both have in common a lack of faith in the working class's ability to take up revolutionary ideas and fight for them. This is the source and meaning of the phrase, "Left in form but right in essence".

Economists deal with this lack of faith by falling back into the purely economic struggle. Terrorists deal with it by engaging on their own in "single combat with the government" (1973, p. 47). Lenin's position was in the tradition of Marx and Engels when they proclaimed, "The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions."

However, Lenin does argue that Marxist theory was not developed spontaneously from working class struggle; it was developed by intellectuals with access to broad knowledge of society and culture and the leisure to study it in detail. On the one hand, this is just simple historical fact. Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao, even Stalin had fairly strong educational backgrounds, Marx most of all – he had a doctorate in philosophy. Joseph Dietzgen, who developed the philosophy of dialectical materialism independently of Marx and Engels, was something of an exception. He was a working class intellectual who had educated himself – although he was considerably more than a simple day laborer. But the main point is that these were not academics in ivory towers sending words of wisdom down to the plebes; they were intellectuals who were active in the revolutionary movements of the times, and Marxism was developed through a close union of the theory and practice of revolution.

Another way of looking at this is through the contradiction between agency and causality. The working class, to the extent it is immersed entirely in the

economic struggle, is relatively un-free, because it is enmeshed in the web of economic causality. To the extent it becomes self-conscious, it is able to step outside of the purely economic struggle and look at its varied relationships to all the other classes and contradictions tangled up in the capitalist system. At this point it begins to be possible to understand the various forces that are pushing and pulling it, and to manipulate those forces rather than just being controlled by them.

The Leninist Party is conceived as the embodiment of the proletariat's self-consciousness. As such, it is a unity of opposites between the spontaneous movement and the relatively objective view from the "outside." The Leninist concept of the Party is based on a recognition of the fact that there is a contradiction between mental and manual labor and a contradiction between leader and led. There must be a constant striving to break down these contradictions by bringing working class activists into the Party and giving them opportunities for training and full-time activism. At the same time, the Party must have the closest possible links with the everyday struggles of the masses. And most important of all, it must never be forgotten that the object of all this is to constantly raise the level of consciousness of the working class as a whole.

None of this, however, will make the contradictions go away – at least not until the end of class society and the abolition of the Party. As long as there is a Party, as such, it will always be a concentration of relative power and privilege. So the Party is outside the working class in both a good and a bad sense – and the good and the bad are inseparable. The Cultural Revolution was the theory and practice of how to deal with this contradiction.

The Mass Line and the Cultural Revolution

Mao's concept of "the Mass Line" was not a new theoretical development. Rather, it took the principles of dialectical materialism and their practical application to revolutionary work as laid out particularly in *What is to be Done* and gave them a popular and systematic presentation. There were two basic principles to the Mass Line. The first was an organizational principle based on the dialectic between leader and led:

However active the leading group may be, its activity will amount to fruitless effort by a handful of people unless combined with the activity of the masses. On the other hand, if the masses alone are active without a strong leading group to organize their activity properly, such activity cannot be sustained for long, or carried forward in the right direction, or raised to a high level. The masses in any given place are generally composed of three parts, the relatively active, the intermediate and the relatively backward. The leaders must therefore be skilled in uniting the small number of active elements around the leadership and must rely on them to raise the level of the intermediate elements and to win over the backward elements. (Mao 1969, III, p. 118)

In any organizing situation, communists must constantly look for the most active, most respected and most idealistic people. The Party must learn from them and unite with them in building organisation and activity. In doing this, the Party must be guided by the other principle of the Mass Line, which is the real heart and soul of all political activity:

In all the practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily “from the masses, to the masses”. This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action. Then once again concentrate ideas from the masses and once again go to the masses so that the ideas are persevered in and carried through. And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time. Such is the Marxist theory of knowledge. (Mao 1969, III, p. 119)

It is clear this is an epistemology: the spiral of learning described in Mao’s *On Practice* and Lenin’s *On the Question of Dialectics* is here applied to the relationship between the Party and the masses. In discussing *On Practice*, I suggested that the practice/theory/practice spiral was presented in a way that seemed to imply a relatively smooth progression. This is not the case in the theory of the Mass Line. Cataclysmic change is part of the equation on both sides of the leader/led contradiction, and both sides interpenetrate and under given conditions can transform into each other. The Party must both lead and be led by the masses.

As far as the role of the masses, there is a big difference between the Mass Line and populism. Populism has an uncritical relationship to popular ideas. It can play a progressive role, but it can also be the basis for fascist demagoguery. The

Mass Line requires a struggle relationship between the Party and the masses. The masses harbour many contradictory ideas. This is true not just for large groups but even for individuals who can, for example, hold some quite racist views while at the same time believing passionately that all people should be treated fairly and given equal opportunity. The process of concentration in the Mass Line involves challenging backwards ideas and calling on people's highest ideals and aspirations. One divides into two.

Before the Cultural Revolution, there was perhaps not a clear understanding that this principle – one divides into two – applied to the Party as well. But in fact, according to the theories Mao developed in the course of the Cultural Revolution, it applies to the Party most of all. As the location of the highest concentration of power in Socialist society, it must also be the arena of the most intense class struggle for two reasons. First, because power and the inevitable privilege associated with it lays the material basis for the constant regeneration of class division. Second, because power is the ultimate object in any revolutionary struggle.

But that second point must be unravelled a bit, because it is only half true. Consider the following excerpt from a discussion Mao had with a visiting delegation from Albania during the Cultural Revolution:

Here I'll ask you a question: Tell me, what is the object of the great proletarian cultural revolution? (Someone answered that it was to struggle against the capitalist roaders in the Party.) The struggle against the capitalist roaders in the Party is the principal task, but not the object. The object is to solve the problem of world outlook and eradicate revisionism.

The Center has repeatedly stressed the importance of self-education, because a world outlook cannot be imposed on anyone, and ideological remolding represents external factors acting on internal factors, with the latter playing the primary role. If world outlook is not reformed, then although two thousand capitalist roaders are removed in the current great cultural revolution, four thousand others may appear the next time. (Milton and others 1974, pp. 263-264)

The seizure and/or the holding of power inside the Party for the proletarian line will determine whether the revolution is continued or beaten back and destroyed. Consequently, it is the principal task. But this cannot be accomplished in a purely structural or bureaucratic way, for the simple reason that the question of power cannot be *finally* resolved as long as there are class contradictions in society. The bourgeoisie inside the Party will continue to regenerate itself as long as there is the material basis for class division.

If class contradictions have been removed, there is no need for a Party (or a state, understood in the Marxist sense of a dictatorship of one class over another), but until then, there is no way to bypass or short circuit class struggle. The only guarantee of the revolution is the ever more conscious political activity of the masses. According to Mao, as long as there is a Party, there will be a need for a continuing series of cultural revolutions led by the Party against itself.

The struggle between the two classes cannot be settled in one, two, three or four cultural revolutions... Two or three cultural revolutions should be carried out every hundred years. (Milton and others p. 264)

Conclusion

One of the most exciting aspects of Hegel's philosophical system was its conception of the history of human culture as a work in progress, as a project that was "on the march", so to speak, the idea that all these collections of oddities, like "earth, air, wind and fire", "atoms flying through space", phlogiston, "cogito ergo sum", "shadows in a cave", angels, demons, stone tablets with the word of god written on them... all this weird collection of ideas and points of view were not merely that – a weird collection – but were different examples of the human race reaching out and trying to understand the universe, and in the process, to understand itself. More than this, they were not just random attempts, but a progressive effort, with each new idea building on the ones that came before.

This idea of human progress was certainly not originated by Hegel, but he was the culmination, the high point – at least on the level of philosophy – of the excitement and confidence in progress that is often identified by the name *The Enlightenment*. The great project of Postmodernism has been to take back this wonderful gift, dismantle it, and – in at least some versions of Postmodernism – to label it as the work of Satan (a fictional, secular Satan for the most part, but every bit as evil as the supernatural original).

What I've just presented in the last two paragraphs is, of course, another grand narrative, one that attempts to digest the grand narrative of the Enlightenment as well as the attack on grand narratives that is known as Postmodernism. The way I've presented it, the Enlightenment is cast as the hero and Postmodernism as the villain. This reverses the grand narrative of

Postmodernism – which logically should be an oxymoron, but is not – where the Enlightenment is cast as the villain and Postmodernism as the heroine, riding to the rescue.

Scientific Marxism stands in the middle of these two grand narratives – the Enlightenment and Postmodernism – with one foot in each camp. This is true chronologically: Marxism begins more or less immediately after Hegel and is followed fairly soon thereafter by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. It is also true conceptually: Marxism continues and builds on some aspects of the idea of progress that it inherited from Hegel and the Enlightenment; it dismantles others.

The dismantling begins with Marx and Engels taking over the dialectical method from Hegel, but “standing it on its head”, stripping it of its “mystical shell” to get to its “rational kernel” – although in a sense the demolition of Hegel actually began with Hegel himself. The dialectic is driven by negativity, by the vision of determinate being as forever in contradiction with the new and arising, which will destroy and replace the old and dying away. The Totality towards which Hegel’s dialectics drove was the static, idealist element in his philosophy and as such, the obvious target for his own dialectical method.

The stripping process that Marx and Engels initiated was famously problematized by Althusser when he challenged the idea that the rational kernel of dialectics could be arrived at simply by substituting “Matter” for “the Ideal”. Althusser had tremendous influence on French Postmodernism – two of his students were Derrida and Foucault. He in turn had been greatly influenced by two thinkers who are not generally admitted to dine at the high table of academic philosophy: Lenin and Mao.

On a practical level, summing up the experience of the era of revolution that followed World War I, Lenin argued that although the contradictions of capitalism must inevitably generate crisis, there is no inescapable crisis. Capitalism is endlessly capable of regeneration, unless the conscious and organized activity of the working class is able to strike a fatal blow. In a sense, there is a near inevitability to this process. If the contradictions of capitalism must constantly regenerate crisis until they are resolved by communist revolution, then the fact that any particular crisis does not lead to revolution is merely a postponement. However, Mao foresaw that there was at least one possible outcome other than this “nearly inevitable” solution: planet-wide destruction.

As far as the development of dialectics, Lenin’s main contribution to the process of stripping away the remnants of Hegelian idealism was to focus on the law of the unity and struggle of opposites as the one fundamental idea of dialectics, in fact “the rational kernel” that Marx wrote about. Mao took that idea and ran with it.

Mao developed and systematized the role of contradiction as a working tool, useful in studying and transforming particular situations. The last vestiges of dialectics as an “onto-teleological” system, to use a phrase from Derrida, were dismantled with Mao’s critique of synthesis and his rejection of the idea of the negation of the negation as a universal law of movement.

One might think of this stripping process as the postmodern side of Marxism – although I would prefer to think of it as the part of Marxism that progressive Postmodernism borrowed. In any case, it was a part of the general critique of the idea of the inevitability of “Progress” that had been inherited from the Enlightenment. But while Maoism was – or became – a rejection of the

inevitability of progress, it was still very much a defence of the possibility and the fact of progress.

The fact of progress is embedded in the Marxist conception of materialism. Human activity is objective, because it is determined by biological necessity. It is progressive, because human creativity constantly revolutionizes the process of the production and reproduction of life. The paradox of materialism is that human culture and social life are driven forward by this constant revolutionizing of production, but the agency that carries out this revolutionizing is the human society that has been created by it. Thus, the contradiction between determinism and creativity is embedded in material existence itself.

Idealism – at least idealism influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition – seeks an escape from this contradiction, while materialism embraces it. The Western religious tradition conceives of freedom as “free will”, i.e., the free choice between good and evil. A truly free choice requires some form of suspension of causality. Therefore any assertion of “free will”, no matter how secular the version, must always be at war with science, which seeks for the causal determinants of any phenomenon.

Materialism – what Marxism calls mechanical materialism – accepts science and causality without reservation. The result is a crude determinism. Dialectical materialism starts with science and causality, but understands that causality is not unidirectional. Cause and effect are a unity of opposites, which means that under given conditions, one can transform into the other. Consequently, organisms are both determined by and determining of their environment “and are thus actors in their own evolutionary history”(Levins and Lewontin p. 174).

If this is true of organisms in general, how much more true of self-conscious entities, which are able not only to react to their environment, but to step outside of the process and examine both sides of the interaction? It is at this point of reflexivity that freedom is born – freedom not understood as a break in the chain of causality, but as a leap in consciousness that enables the entity to understand the chain of causality at a deeper level and, consequently, to exercise greater control over the development of the process.

This point of reflexivity is the defining moment of the theory of Communist revolution. It explains why there is no logical contradiction between materialism and political activism. On the contrary, the more materialist the theory, the more decisive the role of consciousness in effecting change. It explains what Marx meant when he wrote, “Material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory, too, becomes a material force once it seizes the masses... As philosophy finds its material weapon in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its *spiritual* weapon in philosophy” (2009, pp. 137, 142).

In terms of the history of philosophy, there is a surprising turnaround embedded here. Althusser’s critique of humanism, his stripping dialectics of its gratuitous “onto-theological” element, seemed to lead logically to his conclusion that, “History therefore does not have a Subject, in the philosophical sense of the term, but a *motor*: that very class struggle (1976, p. 99).

But this phrase of Althusser’s, “the motor of history”, actually appears nowhere in the canon of Scientific Marxism. *The Communist Manifesto* says that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”, but that’s not quite the same: it is not saying that class struggle is the motor of history. In Marxist theory, history is driven forward by the development of the forces of

production and reproduction, a development which ultimately is a product of human creativity faced with biological necessity. Class struggle is the result of this creative drive coming up against the ossification of social relations based on earlier modes of production.

In other words, for Scientific Marxism, history does have a subject, and it is the human race. “The people, and the people alone, are the motive force in the making of world history” (Mao 1969, III, 257). Marxism is differentiated from the ideology of humanism, because the human race is not some abstract principle but the actual collection of biological entities embedded in the web of contradictory biological and social relationships. It has a biology and a history but no fixed nature and no destiny, and it is always a subject in process, a contradiction between the old and the forces of the new – one divides into two.

Communist revolutionary activism understands itself as taking sides in this division, and in particular, as playing a role in the process of the human race becoming more and more able to consciously choose its own future. It is at this point that what seems to me to be a surprising turnaround occurs, because Sartre, who had become yesterday’s man in French philosophy, begins to be relevant again.

The process of stripping Marxism and Marxist dialectics of every vestige of Hegelian idealism has brought it – or returned it – to the basic existentialist dilemma first clearly articulated by Nietzsche’s “death of god”. Steven Weinberg famously wrote, “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless” (1977, p. 154). This is to say, it has no embedded *a priori* point. The more we understand the causal interrelationships of nature and society, the freer we become. Ultimately, it is up to us what we do with that freedom. Nothing

is determined in advance – not even our existence. We can destroy ourselves at any time. There are no guarantees – just endless possibilities.

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