

*Younger than that now*

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## dedication

This is a book primarily about friendship, and it is dedicated to old friends everywhere. It is also dedicated to a particular group of kids who left the cosseted womb of high school between 1966 and 1972 to enter a world that was as insane as it was exalted.

During the writing of *Younger Than That Now*, the deaths of two of its best friends weighed heavily on us both. We will always be grateful to

**Willie Morris** 1934–1999

a generous man who held his light high to show us the way

**Beverly Lewis Eames** 1948–1999

an editor of gentle power and keen perceptions

*Death is nothing at all. I have only slipped away into the next room. I am I and you are you . . . whatever we were to each other, that we are still. Call me by my old familiar name, speak to me in the easy way which we always used. Put no difference into your tone; wear no forced smile of solemnity or sorrow. Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes we enjoyed together. Let my name be ever the household word that it always was. Let it be spoken without effect, without the ghost of a shadow on it. Life means all that it ever meant. It is the same as it ever was; there is absolutely unbroken continuity.*

CANON HENRY SCOTT HOLLAND

s, members of the same soul-starved family. There was only one person who seemed to be untouched by Labor Committee angst, a genial black man named Teddy.

I caught his eye and he came into the kitchen. While I talked on the phone, he stood behind me and rubbed my shoulders. I think he knew what I meant when I hung up the phone and said, "I'm going home now." "Yep, I'm about done with this scene, too," he replied. Teddy's roots ran deep into the heart of the South, to a sharecropper's shack in Louisiana. The NCLC was a lark for him—a strange outing with the white folks he had met during the first week after he'd migrated north to Milwaukee, looking for work. Thanks to the help of his uncle, he'd found it at A.O. Smith, and that's where we met.

I was assigned to bring him along. I would meet him at A.O. Smith during the morning shift change and hand him some copies of *New Solidarity*. Within twenty minutes all his buddies would buy us out, the younger ones telling Teddy about his "white piece," the older ones delivering advice with their twenty-five cents: "Boy, you bes' be lookin' after yo' momma, 'stead of stalin' this garbage." Almost without exception they'd then toss the paper into the trash cans next to the ramp. Teddy and I just laughed it off. The rest of the afternoon we'd hang out in a coffee shop, laughing—and sometimes crying—as we shared life stories. I loved the sound of his gentle southern voice, though the tales he told me were often sad. For the first time I realized what life was like behind the spare, bare boards of those shacks I used to pass all-unaware in my yellow Camaro convertible.

Not long after I met Teddy, the United States pulled out of Saigon, leaving it to the Vietcong. It was Teddy who burst into Arlen's living room—where I was dutifully listening to Lорice's presentation on the life of Rosa Luxemburg—shouting, "It's over! The Vietnam War is *over*." He turned on the TV set and we all gathered round.

As the panic of the evacuation of Saigon unfolded on the television, he and I stood next to each other. He put his arm around my shoulder, and I put my arm around his waist. We watched a frantic American help a Vietnamese woman climb the ladder into a helicopter that hovered atop the CIA station chief's house. Then it took off. The fear and panic of the Vietnamese who were left behind was awful to see.

I tried to feel victorious. *This is what we all wanted*, I thought. Instead I felt sad. I glanced up at Teddy. He was crying. "This is still America," he said to me.

The day Lорice was attacked was my last in the NCLC. I told Bill that I was quitting. He would have to make up his own mind. I hugged Teddy and left that dour apartment for the last time.

I remember how good it felt to go out and close the door, and how fearful I was that someone might try to stop me. Arlen did call after me, but I just kept on walking and he eventually went back inside. The air was cold and bracing. Snow was mounded along the roadways. The world seemed big and new, and my heart lifted as I walked on. When I neared a neighborhood bar, I went inside for a beer, and drank several, while two kindly grandfathers explained the corrosive evils of road salt to me.

front steps, crying and moaning. When I reached her, I knelt down and tried to figure out where the blood was coming from. She hadn't been cut. Her head wasn't smashed open. Finally I saw several oozing scalp wounds where her hair had been ripped out by the roots, skin and all. Knobby blue bruises were beginning to rise on her face and shoulders.

I looked around for Bill and Rodney. They stood a few houses up, watching like stunned statuary. "Bill," I yelled, "go get the car."

Then I hauled Lorice up and dragged her down the sidewalk. Fear-sweat made my grip on her bare arm slippery and out of the corner of my eye I saw the madwoman coming toward us again.

"Run, Lorice. Run!" I screamed. She tried, but her legs kept buckling and she started babbling in terror. The woman quickly reached us, shoved me to one side and grabbed Lorice's dark hair, dragging her back up the front walk. Lorice writhed and struggled, and in a few seconds the woman fell backward with another bloody hank of hair in her hands. But Lorice was free. She half-crawled, half-ran toward me. Together, we stumbled across the street.

I grabbed a tree limb that was lying in the gutter and Lorice crouched on the ground behind me. But the woman began to retreat to her house, yelling, "You goddamn whitey devils. You come back up on my porch, you be dead. You be burning in hell."

After she went inside—it was probably only a minute since the attack had begun—I looked around for Bill and the car. I saw Rodney running up the street in the opposite direction from us and noticed, oddly, that one of his shoes had a hole in the sole. I didn't see Bill.

Lorice was saying, "Let's get out of here," her mouth so swollen she could hardly speak. We started limping up the block toward the car, both of us looking back fearfully, expecting any minute to be broadsided. Copies of *New Solidarity* were blowing around our feet. Lorice's shoulders trembled under my supporting arm, and I was afraid she was going into shock. I wrapped my sweater around her.

"How bad is it?" she asked me, patting at her hair and desperately feeling the torn patches. Her fingers came away covered with blood, and when she saw it she uttered a cry so bereft and lost that my heart lurched. I wiped it off her hand as best I could with the tail of my shirt, but we kept walking. When we got to the car, Bill came stumbling out of the bushes, sliding on his butt down a small incline in his haste.

"Where were you?" I screamed, and then surprised myself by bursting into tears.

"God, Lorice," Bill said, looking at her bloodied face and head. Lorice tried to cover her head with my sweater, saying, "Don't look at me. Don't look at me."

Just then, a police car pulled up, with an ambulance right behind. Bill

had run to a pay phone and called them. Lorice was trundled into the ambulance, and I got in with her. Bill followed in the car.

At the hospital, Bill called the Milwaukee local of the NCLC and told them what had happened. I wasn't surprised at the response. "They said we shouldn't hang around here. They want us back out in the street, selling. Just tell Lorice to call when she's done and someone'll come get her." I left the message with a nurse, and we went to a nearby supermarket where we managed to sell almost fifty copies of *New Solidarity* by nightfall. I used some of the money to buy two bratwursts and some doughnuts, something I didn't have any qualms about. I thought of it as my commission.

When we got back to Arlen's apartment, our headquarters, in an old German blue-collar section of Milwaukee, Lorice had just returned. She sat at the kitchen table and was being debriefed by phone, telling someone at the Chicago local about the attack. To hide the bandages, she had stylishly wrapped her head with a black kerchief. She took long drags from a cigarette while she listened to the debriefer.

"No, we didn't tell anyone we were going to that neighborhood," she was saying, and Bill and I nodded in affirmation. "Yeah, Rodney's a new recruit. But I don't think . . ." She listened a few minutes. "There was nothing I could do. I know it was my responsibility . . ." Finally, she sighed and handed me the phone. I saw her walk wearily into the front room to join the rest of the group as Arlen read them the latest briefing updates, giving everyone their evening fix of information from the National Committees.

I told my version of the incident to the man on the phone, adding, "At the hospital the police told me the woman is known in the neighborhood as mentally ill. She's always hallucinating about the devil, and today she was tripping her brains out, too. They were trying to contact a family member to get her committed."

"And you believed them?"

"Well, yeah," I said. "You don't?"

"Look at the facts: The working class is being systematically destroyed by Rocky's Trilateral Commission. There's a psychological holocaust going on out there. This is the direct result of Nelson Rockefeller's interference in our daily organizing. If you do your job better, the workers won't be destroyed like this."

"So it's my fault?"

"Let's go over the story again, only this time I want you to tell me more about what Rodney was doing."

"Look, he was ringing doorbells, just like the rest of us. That's all."

About ten people were gathered in the next room. Some of them were talking. Others sat quietly, slumped in their chairs. What I saw when I looked through the kitchen door was a group of demoralized, drifting souls. We had become dumb animals with gaunt faces and dark-rimmed

gain. Luckily there was a very good reconstructive specialist at Oswego Hospital, and Kate was still a very attractive woman when the surgeons finished. But she was not the blooming Irish rose she had been.

She was so vulnerable then, so needy, that she mistook my very real concern for a rebirth of love, and I had to tell her, when I thought she was strong enough to bear it, that although I still held her very, very dear and would do everything I could to get her back on her feet, I didn't love her in that way anymore. She cried then, perhaps mourning her lost beauty and the power it once had over me. But I told her, near tears myself, that that wasn't it.

What was it? That question racked my soul for a long time after that terrible winter's day. I had indeed loved her, and love had died, well before the accident. A false friend of hers had told her I would surely take her back, love her again after the crash, because I owed her nothing less. But I knew Kate herself didn't really believe that. She wanted my love, but not pity disguised as love.

On a bitterly cold and blustery day about a week after the crash I went, at her parents' behest, to check the wrecked car for any personal items that might still be in it. But nothing of a personal nature remained except her blood, which had splashed liberally over the front seat, the dashboard and the floor. It was strange, trying to pry open the glove compartment in that twisted hulk of a car—a car I had practically lived in for a month and associated with so many fond memories.

After that day, I often found myself imagining what the crash must have been like, feeling Kate's terror constrict my own gut as its inevitability became clear. I'd had nothing to do with the wrecking of her car or her beauty, but I was afraid I'd wrecked her heart and maybe her life. I wished, time after time, that I could have loved her again, as she had wanted. But I couldn't. We stayed in touch for a few years, then faded from each other's lives.

39. Ruth

epiphany

A dazed housewife, who had come to the door in her robe and slippers, handed me a quarter and took a copy of *New Solidarity*. Then we heard a commotion across the street.

"Get out of here, you motherfucking bitch!"

I turned to see what was happening. My customer quickly closed her door.

A woman in a soiled cotton nightgown was punching my friend Lorice, who was on her knees, frantically trying to pick up her bundles of papers.

"I'm leaving. I'm leaving," she kept saying. But the woman seemed to be oblivious. She began slapping at Lorice's head and shouting inchoate curses.

Lorice pulled her black beret down over her ears and tried to cover her head with her arms, but as she cowered, the woman leaped forward. Lorice fell down the porch steps under the impact, with the harridan clinging to her. Foam flew from the woman's lips and her nightgown tore away as they rolled together in the grass.

The woman's body was hard and black, and her grip on Lorice was predatory, the black widow suffocating her prey. I tasted bile in my throat as I watched.

Bill, Rodney, Lorice and I had been ringing doorbells in midtown Milwaukee for hours, and though we hadn't sold many papers, this was the first time we'd been assaulted for trying. What I was seeing was almost too brutal to believe. *She's going to kill her*, I thought.

I threw down my bundles and ran across the street toward the struggling women just as Lorice broke free and began to stumble away, blood flowing down both sides of her face.

At the sight of the blood, adrenaline pumped through me and I began waving my arms over my head as I ran, yelling at the woman to "get back in your house," to "shut the fuck up," to "watch out," though for what I didn't know. But I was gratified to see a look of incredible, unreasonable fear come over her face, and she scurried back toward her house, screaming curses at us.

Lorice had quit running and was sitting on the sidewalk by the woman's

venty-four, and the living was easy. Looking at this picture always makes me smile, but it also makes me sad. None of us could have predicted how drastically our lives were about to change, and how soon.

Within three years, Ben and Jerry started a little shop that would lead them to riches and fame but consume them in a way that the two carefree young men in that photo couldn't have imagined. The seeds of it had always been in Ben, of course; it was no accident that we'd named him chief of the Tribe in high school.

Movie-star handsome, Fred could have been a Don Juan but was ever the most sensitive and responsible of us. He would get married the next year to his beautiful betrothed, Alalia Kempner, the first of us to take the lunge.

Jerry had always been diffident and self-effacing, and what little ego he had took a drubbing when he failed twice to get into medical school. But none of that shows in the picture. A good sport, steady, tolerant and sensible, he would later characterize his main contribution to Ben & Jerry's, typically of him, in the negative.

"You know how they say these great guys always surround themselves with yes men, Durst? Well, I was Ben's no man. He'd get an idea, and I'd say no. Then he'd come back with another idea, and I'd say no again. It kept me sane and the business solvent."

Two faces are missing from the group portrait—Ron, who was playing summers at the Aspen Music Festival back then, and Feldo, who'd begun his career as David Harp, blues-harmonica and meditation guru to the Bay Area. Later, he would move east and rejoin the group. Ron, disciplined and musically gifted, had always been Mr. Know-it-all, and we tolerated his airs with reasonably good humor. Later, to our horror, we realized he really did know it all, or at least most of it.

In the picture, I had a stalk of hay sticking out from what Vin called my "Mona Durst" smile and was playing my traditional role: jester, gadfly, skeptic, chronicler and idea man who was always trying to hand his inspirations off to someone else—usually Fred or Jerry or Vin—to actualize.

Vin was dressed incongruously in a black shirt and dark jeans, his smiling face masked by a heavy beard and stark shadow as he leaned against Pepe's windshield. There were so many Vins: the brooding philosopher, the charismatic storyteller, the suave Latin lover, the paragon of practicality who once told me he'd bought Pepe mainly because it had four doors. ("A car's got to have ease of access, Durst—it's the first thing I look for.") He was the uncomplicated Vin who just plain loved to sing, preferably in harmony with others, and the calculating Vin who, at the height of the gas crisis, considered selling his little car for double what he'd paid for it. "I'll just put a sign on it," he said. "FOR SALE—call in your bid at 1-800-38MPG."

Even then, when the picture was taken, Vin was prone to terrible headaches. But none of us gave them a second thought.

One morning in March of 1975, Kate set out for Syracuse on business. She didn't get far. A mile or two south of Oswego on Route 57, her little import hit an ice patch just as she was reaching highway speed and slid into the path of an oncoming Buick. Her seat belt kept her alive, but it didn't keep her face from hitting the steering wheel with tremendous force.

I got a phone call later that day, after coming home from an early shift at the paper. They'd been trying to call me for hours, the woman at the hospital said. Kate, in her few moments of consciousness, had kept repeating, over and over: "Call Jeff, call Jeff, I want Jeff here." Finally, they'd gotten my name from another friend who'd heard about the accident on the radio. "We called as soon as we got your number," the woman said. "We're not sure she's going to make it, but she sure wants to see you."

They were wheeling her from the OR to the acute-care section of Oswego Hospital just as I burst through the door, numb with shock.

The Kate I saw in the wheelchair at that moment looked almost inhuman, with her hair tied back, bandages everywhere and tubes growing out of her like weird appendages. There was nothing recognizable of her face except her eyes, and in them I saw terror, pain and, finally, a flicker of hope when she saw me. Then they wheeled her away.

I stayed in the waiting room and in the corridor outside for what seemed an eternity, pacing, sitting, standing, pacing, repeating a kind of prayer out loud over and over: "Save Kate, make her well again, make her all right." It was something I'd learned from a Buddhist author when I was a teenager—formulate a simple prayer or mantra, focus all your will on it, envision it happening and repeat the words out loud to give them more force. In my mind, I saw her as she had been, and as I hoped she would be: the lovely young woman with whom I'd shared life, the sweet joys of the flesh and an all-too-brief touching of the soul.

Eventually, whether my prayers had anything to do with it or not, she did recover. That alone, her doctor told me, was a miracle. "When they first brought her in here," he said, "we thought she was a goner for sure." They were surprised when she was still alive after twenty-four hours, and they were amazed at her strong recovery. She looked ravaged when they finally allowed me in to see her, but I held her hand, kissed her brow and told her I would be there for her, and that she would be okay.

And I was there nearly every day for weeks, watching with growing satisfaction as she progressed from battered invalid to halting walker to almost-good-as-new young woman. But her face would not be the same

38. Jeff

## wreckage

From late 1974 to mid-1976, I worked my way up the ladder, such as it was, at the *Oswego Valley News*: delivering papers and operating the clackety old Addressograph machine in the early days; taking pictures of kids' birthday parties and the ever-popular reunion shots (once I captured five generations of daughters on film); editing the gobs of community news that came in over the transom every week (no occurrence in Fulton was beneath our notice); covering school boards and town boards; reporting on the proceedings of the Oswego County legislature; and writing editorials and a regular political column. I did everything but assign others, since here was no one under me.

Photos from those days show a young man with merry eyes, loud clothes and a cocky smile, his arm around this striking redhead or that aftig blonde. Life for me was about to become just the sort of sexual playground Ruth had so often caught Bill veering into, with the exception that 'd neither pledged nor contracted my fidelity.

Things had started to go sour with Kate not long after our epiphany on the plains of Nebraska. Within a week or two of my starting work, the *Valley News* hired a heart-stopping blonde, just out of high school, to set type and lay out pages. With her flawless features, glorious hair and svelte figure, she was a miraculous freak of nature. Although she was engaged, I found it nearly impossible to keep my eyes off her. One day, Kate picked me up for lunch, and when we got back to the paper, we pulled up next to the blonde. She got out of her car and walked the ten feet or so to the door, waving to me discreetly—we were coworkers, after all—and giving us a shyly dazzling smile before vanishing into the building.

Kate's eyes drilled into mine and wiped the appreciative grin off my face. "Who," she demanded, "was that?"

I told her there was nothing between us, which was true—the blonde had been ignoring my overtures. But I was meeting a lot of new women then, and some of them were not indifferent to me. By the end of that year, I told Kate I needed "more freedom." She was clearly hurt, but instead of crying, she promptly moved out. She told me that if I could see others, so could she, and that upset me. We dated for a while longer, but

the glow of that Nebraska night—the first time I'd accepted the idea of a mature commitment to a woman—had faded.

We went our separate ways for Thanksgiving that year—she to Quincy and I to Merrick, where I would see Vin for the first time in about four months. He'd come back from Germany, having finally admitted to himself that he couldn't stay in a country where he couldn't express himself adequately, his lover's support and help with the language notwithstanding. When I saw him at his house, we hugged for a long time before talking. I didn't say it, but I was very relieved he'd come home.

When I got Ruth's "I feel like God" letter a few months later, I recoiled from it as if from an unexpected slap to the face. I reread it perhaps half a dozen times, desperately searching for some link to the person she had been, some clue as to how I might be able to restart our conversation. But I found none. For the second time in my life I'd been rocked to my foundations by a letter from Ruth, but this one, unlike her response to my first letter back in 1969, seemed to contain no invitation to keep the dialogue going. The sensitive, intelligent Ruth I'd known was gone, replaced by a cant-spewing fanatic. Cults by then had become a major societal concern, and it seemed clear to me that Ruth and Bill had joined some kind of a political cult. But I was in no position to "deprogram" her, so I regretfully put her letter away, trusting that her extraordinary mind would eventually bring her back to her senses. And that she would get back in touch with me when it did.

Ben, meanwhile, had taken a job at Highland Community School in tiny Paradox, a flyspeck of a settlement in the wild Adirondacks. He was teaching disturbed children what he had learned: how to turn their anger and frustration into art. He had a girlfriend there, along with his now free-ranging dog, Malcolm, who needed a place as big as the north woods to roam. But Malcolm's advent at Highland coincided with the suspicious disappearance of several chickens, and he was banished from the school. When I heard the story of how Ben had kept his listeners rapt during his masterful but ultimately unsuccessful defense of Malcolm, it was easy to picture it. Ben had played the lawyer, Alfieri, in our high school production of Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge*, and he'd been waiting ever since to do a courtroom scene. As for Malcolm, he eventually went to live with Fred Thaler, who didn't keep chickens.

We old friends from Merrick gathered at Highland one summer afternoon in 1975—the Paradox Summit, I called it. We had beards then, and a lot more hair in general. The photo shows me in a characteristic pose—leaning against Vin. He's sitting on the roof of his old blue Renault, Pepe LePew, which I'd named after he told me that it stank as a car, but women thought it was cute. Ben is behind the wheel, waving, and Fred sits on the roof with his legs draped over the shoulders of a grinning Jerry. We were

he week after I mailed this letter, Bill and I moved to Milwaukee. With the Labor Committees' help, I came to believe that my passion for eclectic linkers, historical drama and storytelling was a symptom of a fatal flaw: at twenty-four, I was too intellectually soft.

I developed deep friendships with some of the NCLC members, a sense of camaraderie and a fascination with the mores and inhabitants of America's industrialized heartland. There were some days when I might have believed I was happy. On the streets outside grocery stores, in airports, in Sears parking lots, I learned to hawk the NCLC's publications, shouting out the daily headlines: "Only two more weeks until nuclear holocaust." "Only one more week . . ." "Only three more days . . ." When it didn't happen we deliriously proclaimed the news: "NCLC averts nuclear holocaust!"

We sold enough *New Solidarity* newspapers, we thought, to build the organization's international network of telex communications—state-of-the-art for the times. Some members of the group were privileged children of wealthy families, and their trust funds also helped pay for an expansive Virginia farm and mansion for Lyndon LaRouche, as well as for the much-touted technology.

Bill and I lived better than most of the membership, in a cold upstairs apartment in the inner city, all my sixty dollars a week in unemployment compensation would allow. We rose each morning at 6:30, attended a briefing, set out for a day of selling newspapers, then returned to headquarters to count money, be debriefed and have evening "classes" before we went home about eleven o'clock to fall into bed.

Some weekends we would go to Chicago or New York to hear the doctrine of LaRouche, who would speak for hours on Germanic philosophers, musical counterpoint, art and nuclear fusion power without once consulting a note. His lieutenants would usually rise to brief us all on the constant threat of assassination he lived under, and to solicit emergency funds to pay for security.

According to Dennis King, in his book *Lyndon LaRouche, and the New American Fascism*, LaRouche foresaw a society in which he would be the ultimate dictator and would be able to exercise "total control over the individual's innermost thoughts." The entire story of LaRouche's flawed genius is told in detail by Mr. King. My experience with him is limited to a nine-month period in 1974–75 when I was a local organizer. This was the time when the organization was being whipped into shape financially. Using the telex system, the national committee inundated media and key political contacts around the world with updates on our rallying cry: Nelson Rockefeller's conspiracy against mankind through the evil Trilateral Commission. It also began the more lucrative activity of soliciting loans that were never repaid. They were called campaign donations under the guise of the

formation of a new national political party, the U.S. Labor Party, which began fielding candidates in elections across the country. LaRouche himself ran for president in 1976 as a Labor Party candidate, and in Democratic primaries from 1980 to 1996. In 1988 he was indicted for defrauding lenders of more than \$30 million. He was convicted the same year of fraud and conspiracy. On his Web site résumé, he had also claimed that in 1982–83 he participated in exploratory talks with the then Soviet government, which led to Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative.

The political philosophy feeding LaRouche's party in 1974 was deemed "beyond Marxism." Mastery of it was a requisite of membership. Among other things, we were told that the black community was a CIA target and blacks were being manipulated within their CIA-controlled ghetto cultures. Jazz was defined as brainwashing. The final logic of this scenario was that black inner city youth—who had obviously succumbed to their CIA masters—could be addressed as "nigger."

"What are you people, fascists?" Bill interjected when we were told this at a briefing. Others in our group quickly backed him up. There was nervous laughter.

"Why don't we just call ourselves the Ku Klux Klan?" I asked. More laughter.

The speaker merely smiled and switched to a discussion of Beethoven.

We would have been shocked to know that the NCLC was, according to King, in very amicable discussions with members of the KKK. I was worried about being affiliated with a Communist organization, when the NCLC was even then moving far to the right. Beyond Marxism indeed.

Bill and I spent countless hours reading and studying, getting a better education in Western philosophy and politics than we had gotten at UT. But that benefit was far outweighed by the brutalized and controlled nature of our day-to-day lives. Even as we were verbally flogged each day to use creative thinking to achieve "humanistic relevance" in the world, the reality was that we and our comrades spent most of our time in dehumanizing and mind-deadening activity, hawking newspapers to blue-collar workers.

## 37. Ruth

## friendly fire

When I joined the Labor Committees, I wrote Jeff a letter that inflicted a grievous wound to our friendship, and for years afterward I thought it had been fatal. Later, when things became clearer to me, I felt riven with shock and shame at my wrongheadedness.

January 13, 1975

Dear Jeff,

Much has changed since your visit and I hesitate to unfold it within the limited scope of a letter but it must be attempted if we hope to continue to communicate. There are innumerable reasons to recoil in dismay from reality. However, Bill and I have ruthlessly confronted those reasons and found them less than human, if not totally insane. Throughout our lives, Jeff, we have been surrounded with fantasy—TV, mother's homeside magic, Vietnam and its deluded antiwar "revolutionaries," the myth of success, etc.—and we have responded with neurotic insanity, feverishly constructing more fantasy, performing propitiatory rituals to dead pasts. Now the fantasies are melting away.

This letter is VERITABLY IMPOSSIBLE for me to write, so big is the gulf between yourself (who can write impassively of Rockefeller and William F. Buckley) and myself (who is pouring my intellect, creativity, time, energy, probably my life's blood into the battle for humanity against the bestialized filth of those men and their following). Have you read about TRIAGE as suggested by Rocky's Trilateral Commission? If so, how can you possibly tolerate it and call yourself human? Examine fusion power, negentropy, Descartes, Spinoza, Einstein, Feuerbach, Marx, Luxemburg, Hegel, Oparin, Vernadsky—in essence break out of the controlled environment spawned by "higher education" and begin your education anew.

Bill and I have embarked on the excruciating task of finding the real world and we are tempted to backslide daily, but the realization of the discovery of self-conscious mentation of the type experienced by Descartes, "I think therefore I am," and the responsibility it carries of negentropic growth constantly compels us to tear out the demons of our education. I.e., we are confronting the "giggling, nervous infants of bourgeois fear" which grip and strangle the minds of most of our acquaintances, our families, our friends—and we are becoming members of a new species, equipped to make the conceptual leap which is absolutely necessary if the human race is to survive an impending ecological holocaust.

Political, economic, psychological, personal, moral, scientific, artistic levels—all the pursuits of mankind—must be conceptually raised to the next level of human progress. We are in the process of an intellectual renaissance, Jeff, and it is very real. I would be less than equal to the demands of a truly creative friendship if I didn't joyfully bring it within the grasp of your mind.

I've enclosed several clippings which I hope you will read. They're from *New Solidarity*—you know, the paper you used to laugh at? We are planning to leave Madison and will be organizing full-time with the Labor Committees in Milwaukee and Chicago. I quit my job in November and have since been making the intellectual leaps necessary to maintain the integrity of my decision to be a world historical being rather than Ruth Tuttle of Yazoo City. I am beginning to locate myself by my mental coordinates rather than geographically. Within me exists not only the experiences of 23 years, but also an intensifying sensuous grasp of the geometry of the universe and the laws and forms I am capable of imposing on it.

Of all my friends, you are the one I know best intellectually. We have shared our minds much more than our experiences and for this reason, I am convinced that you have the intellectual integrity to grapple with your bourgeois persona and fear and to discover your humanity, your pride. This will be very straining to our relationship because it calls for an honesty not accepted in polite society and is certainly far removed from the magnanimous apathy of the counterculture many of our peers have opted for.

So, there you have an infinitesimal glance into the burgeoning currents of my life. Jeff, I feel like every human being can potentially feel. I feel like God.



That unfroze her heart, and late that night, in a motel room somewhere in Minnesota, she made it abundantly clear that all was forgiven. The next night, as we hurtled west across the pitch-dark plains of Nebraska, I realized with a kind of weak-kneed rush that I really did treasure this wonderful lady who had cared for me so selflessly in Madison, and that I should tell her so, which I did. She was driving, and when she leaned over to give me a passionate kiss, her hand on my thigh, we almost went off the road. Confessing love was at once liberating and frightening, as if I'd drained the moat around my castle and lowered the drawbridge. I'd given someone the run of my heart at last, but could I keep the commitment up and the drawbridge down? I was at last ready to try.

We stopped to visit Feldo and his girlfriend, Mona Bernstein, in San Francisco, but they had just rented a huge Victorian on spec and were frantic to find paying sublessees before the next month's rent came due. Their financial obligations—which constituted a real crisis, Feldo gravely informed me—meant they were wrapped up in placing ads, working the phone and interviewing possible housemates while we were there. We made the best of our visit anyway, going up to the Napa Valley for a somewhat pixilated tour of the wineries and noshing and buying souvenirs at Fisherman's Wharf. Feldo and Mona took us out for dinner on our last night in town, and we tried not to gawk as several gay couples made out in the dark anteroom of a pizza restaurant—something we'd never seen in Oswego.

The rest of the trip was a series of snapshots, some preserved on film and some in the crystal-clear/soft-focus medium of memory: Kate, smiling in the brittle light of early morning, with the cozy little log cabin we'd rented just outside Yellowstone behind her; me sitting, like the Cheshire Cat, suspended off the ground on a tree limb in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park; the two of us gasping for breath in the waiting room of a Dodge dealership in L.A., breathing literary laughing gas from Woody Allen's *Without Feathers* while Kate's car was being serviced; a skunk with tail upraised, its business end pointed directly at my face, at our campsite just south of the Grand Canyon; Kate perched on the canyon's rim, her own fresh-faced radiance rivaling the glories of nature.

We slept most of the day we got back, but then reality hit with a thud. I had borrowed from Kate, my mother and my brother for expenses during the trip, and I was even in hock to the kindly dentist Ruth had set me up with in Madison, who had agreed to remove two wisdom teeth, with local anesthesia, for sixty dollars, with only thirty dollars down.

I set off for my job interview in Fulton, about a fifteen-minute drive south along the Oswego River, on a windy, overcast day soon after returning home. There was no trace of snow in Oz when I left—as there shouldn't have been, given that it was only the tenth of October. In Fulton, however,

a freakish lake-effect storm had dumped more than a foot of snow, snapping trees and cutting power. My doughty '67 Beetle was indifferent to slick roads, and I was able to thread my way past downed limbs to the *Oswego Valley News* on time, if just barely. But when I entered its cold, dark building—which the paper shared with a gas station in those days—the receptionist told me Mr. Caravan would be delayed. I fidgeted for the better part of an hour, thinking that I could hardly have picked a worse day to apply for a job and wishing I'd brought my camera so that I could at least get some shots of the storm damage while I waited.

Vince Caravan probably thought I was a very determined—or very desperate—job seeker to have shown up on such a day. In any case, he hired me for an amount that came out, after taxes, to ninety-five dollars a week—a big raise from the *Democrat*. Still, that odd number bugged me. I took my first check in to his office the day I got it and pointed out that if he would just toss another few dollars into the pot, I could take home an even hundred. He stared at me at first; then he smiled and said, "I like even numbers, too. A hundred it is."

have emergency dental surgery that afternoon. For three more days he lay on our couch, drifting in and out of a drugged sleep. As Kate nursed him, I cooked soups to tempt his appetite. By the time Jeff was back on his feet, it was the last day of their visit.

That night, we went to see *The Battleship Potemkin*, the classic Soviet-era film about a 1905 naval uprising. Its idealistic Communist message seemed to push both men over the edge. When Bill said it was a great movie, Jeff replied that it was "a great piece of propaganda." By the time we got home, Bill had let loose with a mind-numbing torrent of statistics about Soviet steel production under Stalin. Jeff called the statistics immoral justifications of genocide, punctuating points by pounding his fist on the kitchen counter. I knew Bill was using Jeff as a devil's advocate, because this was precisely the issue he had been grappling with lately. But they both seemed to be trying to inflame rather than elucidate. I was angry with Jeff for getting sucked into Bill's tirade, and angry with Bill for launching it. I wanted someone to reach a reasoned conclusion, the answer to my own doubts. But instead they were indulging in useless political one-upsmanship. When Kate slipped off to bed around midnight, I did, too, though it was several hours before I fell asleep. And Bill and Jeff kept right on arguing.

Saying good-bye to Jeff the next morning felt final, though he smiled and hugged me and promised to write again soon. But the look in his eyes told me all I needed to know: He was appalled, confused and upset by what he'd seen. I had no idea what he stood for, and it was a time when I thought everyone should stand for *something*. He seemed to me the epitome of a complacent ex-activist as he slid into the shiny new car and continued his leisurely cross-country trip with his hot girlfriend. I didn't know the car was Kate's, or that he was between jobs, or that he and Kate would return home to a subsistence lifestyle that made mine look positively middle-class.

I hardened my heart against him and turned to Bill, who seemed in comparison like a noble crusader. We went back into our apartment arm in arm, and a week later I joined the NCLC with him.

36. Jeff

on the road

When Kate and I entered Ruth's apartment, the first thing we saw was a garish early Soviet-era poster of Lenin. You couldn't miss it, since it was directly opposite the door. I thought to myself: *My God, Ruth really has become a Communist*. Other than the face of Lenin, though, there was almost nothing in the apartment inconsistent with a tidy middle-class existence. It struck me during our visit that while Bill might be a fervent Marxist, Ruth's heart really wasn't into it.

Our few days in Madison were spent in the shadow of two imperatives: my dental emergency and Bill's need to administer an ideological litmus test. The pall from our "kitchen debate"—a comical echo of Nixon and Khrushchev, if anyone had noticed—kept things pretty subdued on the morning we left. I felt a bit silly for having gone at it hammer and tongs the night before, although I'm sure I would have started the battle right back up again at the drop of a steel-production statistic. But the looks on Ruth's and Kate's faces made it clear that another round was the last thing they wanted to see, so Bill and I kept things low-key.

I was afraid that the argument would put a strain on my and Ruth's friendship, since I had clearly revealed myself as an enemy in Bill's eyes. Still, I was confident that it would survive. I had no idea to what lengths she would go to preserve her marriage, but nothing could have shaken my belief in our special bond.

Of more immediate concern as we drove away from Madison was the somewhat frosty atmosphere in the car. Kate told me that she had felt very hurt that first night when Ruth and I had ignored her and Bill to delve into our youthful adventures. She had been tempted to leave the next morning without me, she said.

I tried to explain to her the inexplicable—the mystical, irresistible force that had brought Ruth and me together in the first place, and its continuing effects. We hadn't seen each other in so long, I told Kate, that being together had overwhelmed us. But my communion with Ruth hadn't been meant to shut her out, I assured her, adding that she meant more to me than I could say.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled as he was carried to the ambulance.

I turned a horrified face to the MIT woman. "What was that all about?"

"He'll be fine," she consoled me. "It's been a long time since he needed medical care. It's just a little setback. Eventually he won't have asthma anymore." She looked totally convinced of what she'd just said. Evidently NCLC members believed they could fight disease and human frailty as well as change the face of American politics, and they were already practicing psychology on the membership. Why had this well-educated, highly intelligent woman joined what I had thought was an insignificant fringe organization? Was there more to it than I saw?

I let her put an arm around my waist as we walked to some chairs in the back of the room. She knelt on the floor beside me and said, "You really love your husband, don't you?"

"Yes."

"I loved mine, too. But sometimes *real* human beings have to make hard choices. I had to divorce my husband."

"Why?"

"He wouldn't join the Labor Committees. Even after he heard Lyndon LaRouche speak in New York last spring—wait until *you* hear him, he's a genius—he wouldn't let go of his fears. I had to move on."

"Like Bill will, you mean? If I don't join?"

She crooked an eyebrow, a knowing "what else could he do?" look. Then she said, "But that's not what has to happen. You can *both* be in the vanguard of a new American renaissance."

We seemed to be making quantum leaps, from this bare, basement meeting room to a renaissance. From divorce to a vanguard. My head was spinning. She went on, "There's only one thing stopping you from joining him."

"What's that?"

"You have to forget mother's homeside magic. Forget Reverend Jorgenson. Forget—"

"Hey, how do you know about him?"

"Bill and I had a long talk yesterday. I understand you were a big Christian—once."

I looked over her shoulder at Bill, who was watching us. He looked happier than I had seen him in months. He smiled at me.

"What do you mean by renaissance?" I asked the woman.

By the time Jeff and Kate arrived, I was beginning to digest the Labor Committees' essence. I was finding some of it delightful, like Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," the NCLC's theme song. The political and economic theory I

mostly dismissed, but I found it easy to revile consumer-oriented "Amerika" and to float above the humdrum of nine-to-five life. I was a dreamer, susceptible to the influence of people who hailed from the cream of academia. The NCLC spoon-fed all of it to me in prodigious quantities.

Still, I wasn't ready to quit my job and move to Milwaukee to become a full-time organizer. It was my only effective argument—how would we live? But soon even that argument became moot.

My employer (a former military man reputed to pick his secretaries by their bra size), while introducing the women on his professional staff at an annual meeting, described us as "the most gorgeous girls" he'd ever been privileged to employ. We "gorgeous girls" were then invited to parade across the stage to prove his point. It was a humiliating spectacle.

I quit on feminist principle—though no one else did—and sued for unemployment compensation. I won the case after my former boss got on the witness stand and offended the female judge by saying he didn't understand what was wrong with his behavior. The verdict was later overturned and I had to repay the money I'd collected, but that didn't happen until two years later. Slowly, all the obstacles to joining the NCLC began to vanish.

When Jeff and Kate arrived, I rushed out to the parking lot to meet them, with Bill following close behind. Kate got out of the car first. She was a gorgeous young woman, with a figure that struck envy in my heart, and I quickly glanced at Bill, whose eyes were popping out. Then Jeff was there beside me—not the boy of my memories, but a handsome, self-assured man with long hair and sideburns. My face burned with pleasure. We hugged for a long time.

"You're still taller than me," he said.

"Oh Jeff, just let it go," I laughed.

"But, you know, I still wonder. Which one of us led the other one on?"

"What are you talking about?" Kate asked. I let the subject drop and led them into our apartment. Bill brought up the rear with their bags.

That first night, Jeff and I relived our Yazoo-Merrick adventures, laughing until we cried over our hapless attempt at matrimony in the airport. Every so often one of us would look over at Bill, who was reading, or Kate, who had dozed off on the sofa. But mostly we reveled in our time with each other and didn't try to include them. Later, behind our closed bedroom door, Bill heaped scorn on me for my lapse into "burgher fantasies with a political lightweight." And the next morning, though they were civil to each other, I could see that Jeff wasn't enamored of Bill, either. Things weren't going well.

Jeff and I didn't have a chance to discuss it, though, because he had to

## 35. Ruth

## worlds collide, again

My life in Madison was schizophrenic, torn as I was between Marx and Gimbel's, revolution and interior decorating, anguish and complacent domesticity. Some days I gratefully laid the activist's banner down. But Bill was always there to pick it up again, steadily looking for a new movement.

By spring, he was presenting another political option to me: Communism. "If someone could show me how to move it out of the conceptual realm of Marx and into the real world," I'd say to him, "maybe I'd be more enthusiastic."

The truth was, his politics were beginning to bore me. I would listen to his polemics, but realize after a few minutes that my mind had wandered. Then, on the Sunday before Jeff and Kate arrived, he finally captured my full attention. "I'm moving to Milwaukee," he said.

My heart fluttered with anxiety. Was this an ultimatum? Would he go without me?

But I was impatient with the timing of this confrontation. It was nine o'clock, and I wanted to watch *Upstairs, Downstairs*, the British soap opera that had become like electronic laudanum, injected weekly into my confusing life. At least the characters seemed to know their places in the world. I drew closer to the TV.

"What's in Milwaukee?" I asked, arranging a bed of cushions on the floor.

Bill began to pace. The "da-ta-da-ta-da" of "Rondeau" by Mouret, the *Masterpiece Theatre* theme, filled the edges of my mind while he gestured and talked, his voice rising when needed to overwhelm the television. "We've been wasting our time looking for political consciousness in Madison. I think it's time to get serious—I'm joining the National Caucus of Labor Committees. No matter what you decide to do, I'm joining."

"But Bill," I said, looking for a chink in the armor of his resolve, "my job's here, and we've made friends. Besides, I thought you had decided the Labor Committees was a bunch of crisis-mongering extremists? I thought you couldn't stomach their views on Stalin?"

"I'm willing to withhold judgment for a while about that. Besides,

LaRouche is a Trotskyite, and that's where it's at for me." He went on to paraphrase Lenin as saying that in times of revolution it was more important to knock heads than to cradle them.

I watched Rose carrying her tea tray into the Bellamys' drawing room, and wished I didn't have to think about Stalin right then. I sighed and turned off the set. It was getting more and more difficult to keep my safe philosophical perch, from which I could comfortably survey Bill's political forays as though they were merely an afternoon's entertainment.

I had created an alternative Bill, my Billy, whom I deeply loved for his ability to engage me intellectually and for the affectionate patter we exchanged as we moved around our cozy apartment. Still, when I was presented with the entire package of "Bill-ness," I felt threatened and unsure about what I was doing with him. But after struggling for so long to keep our marriage together, I pricked up my ears when he said that the NCLC had strict moral requirements: no drinking, no drugs and no frivolous sexual involvements. So, the next day I went with him to an NCLC meeting.

"Stop thinking about your mother," someone yelled. "You don't need mother's magic." The thin, bearded man writhing on the floor nodded his head and struggled to breathe. His face was becoming blue. In 1974, many people thought asthma was psychosomatic, and I figured this man was trying to overcome a neurosis, though it seemed an extreme cure. But I became really alarmed when he began to lose consciousness.

A plump, blond woman was telling me that she was on her way to MIT, armed with several awards and grants for her unique mathematical theories and also with her fanatic devotion to the Labor Committees. I put my hand on her arm to get her to stop talking. "He's going to die," I protested.

She turned around to look and, almost reluctantly, said, "I'll call an ambulance." I was relieved to hear sirens even before she hung up—the hospital was right across the street.

Arlen, a tall, balding intellectual who seemed to be the leader of NCLC's Madison cadre, knelt on the floor and held the man's head. "You know asthma is a mother-induced illness, don't you? You know that. We've discussed it."

The man could no longer nod. His chest rattled, and I saw bubbles of foam beginning to come from his mouth. Arlen turned to the rest of us and said, "He'll be fine. Really. He's been doing a lot better lately, and it's just going to take some time before he becomes a fully realized human being. It's hard work." The group nodded sympathetically. Then three paramedics burst into the room and began to revive the man. After a hypodermic and some oxygen, he was breathing again.