



HERE COMES THE SUN

Gordon Shepherd

Author's Note: Confidentiality concerns have led me and my brother Gary to employ pseudonyms for several of the individuals described in this and the succeeding article with whom we have conducted personal interviews.

In the spring of 2002 I was in Michigan taking advantage of that marvelous academic institution known as a sabbatical leave. I was teaching a course in social psychology as a visiting professor for the Oakland Sociology Department and collaborating with my brother Gary in an ethnographic study of an intriguing religious communal group (about which we subsequently wrote a book and several scholarly articles). But that was not what preoccupied our interest during the first week of May that spring. That week Gary and I drove down to Kent, Ohio to renew some acquaintances and participate in the annual May 4th commemorative events at Kent State University. On the Kent State campus thirty-two years earlier, four students had been shot to death and nine wounded by Ohio National Guard troops in a protest demonstration against the Vietnam War.

Gary's personal interest in learning more about the tragic events that transpired at Kent in the spring of 1970 had been stimulated by our shared academic interest in the study of social movements—especially the civil rights and antiwar move-

ments of the turbulent 1960s—not to mention the relatively close proximity of Kent, which is only a four hour drive from his home in the faculty subdivision of Oakland University. In 1989 Gary learned that a reunion and conference were being planned by former members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in conjunction with the 20th anniversary of their being banned from campus, one year before the Kent shootings. Hatched at the University of Michigan in 1961, SDS quickly caught on among student idealists looking for an organized way to put into action their egalitarian social and political values. For a meteoric few years in the mid to late 1960s, SDS became the largest and most influential student organization of the New Left, before imploding into increasingly militant and squabbling factions, including the notorious Weather Underground.

The 1989 SDS reunion at Kent State, at which Gary sat-in, featured retrospective talks on 1960s student radicalism for social change by such former SDS national officers as Carl Oglesby (who, coincidentally, was a Kent State alumnus), Mark Rudd (who led the student occupation of administration offices at Columbia University in 1968), and Bernadine Dohrn (one of the principal organizers and leaders of the Weather Underground). While retrospective views at the conference ranged from some regret (“Our democratic values and goals of equal justice in America were correct, but our turn to violent confrontation was the march over the cliff”) to continued defiance (“We did what we had to do—including violent confrontation—in order to vigorously challenge a corrupt military-industrial complex that exploited and oppressed minority groups, because nobody else was willing to do it”). At the same time, all of the speakers reflected with sadness at the high cost of protest paid by the slain and wounded students at Kent State, and many expressed hope in the future prospects of a new generation of student activists who would be more concerned about pursuing careers of social justice than corporate profits.

While at the conference Gary began introducing himself

to Kent State alumni and others in attendance, explaining his social science interests in both past and contemporary social movements, and also began cultivating a snowball network of contacts who agreed to be interviewed at a later date. Over the years, in fact, Gary conducted a number of open-ended interviews, dragging me into the project as well. For us, one of the major questions in our interviews was: Who were these erstwhile radicals? What were their stories, their personal histories, and what were they doing with their lives decades after the electrifying, defining events of their youth?

So we drove to Kent once again in 2002 for the annual candle light vigil in commemoration of the slain students to ponder the legacy, if any, of their violent deaths, and also to attend a memorial service for one of the more beloved Kent students of 1970 who recently had died of natural causes, far away from the quiet college town which, once upon a time, had been engulfed in a moment of chaos and killing.

I have rescued an old letter that I wrote my (then) fiancé (and now wife) that contains a summary description of Gary's and my experience at the memorial and my impression of some of those who gathered to pay their respects. Since my once supernatural memory has become increasingly degenerate in old age, I now resort to that letter for a snapshot view of a few hours of observation from our 2002 visit to Kent, Ohio.

* * *

May 5, 2002

Dear Faye,

In our phone conversation last night I never got around to telling you about the memorial service Gary and I attended for a former student radical at Kent State. His name was Mike Brock, and apparently he was a big, burley, generous, fun-loving guy with a soft spot in his heart for animals of all kinds, especially dogs, and an unquenchable taste for beer. Some years after the Kent shootings he moved to Fairbanks, Alaska

and became the owner and proprietor of a popular beer joint called the Howling Dog Saloon. They showed some video segments at the memorial service of him at his bar in Fairbanks, and in middle age he looked and talked a lot like a redneck version of “Norm,” from Cheers. Before becoming corrupted by student idealism at Kent State in the late 1960s, Big Mike was originally from Buffalo, New York and was a nonobservant Jew. So, naturally the memorial service was held at the campus Catholic Newman Center.

The memorial was organized by one of the surviving students—Tom Grace—who was shot down by the Ohio National Guard on the on the back side of Blanket Hill on May 4, 1970. Grace is now a professor of history at the State University of New York, Buffalo. On the day of the shootings, Big Mike was also on Blanket Hill protesting against the U.S military “incursion” into Cambodia and defying the Ohio Guard, which had been ordered into Kent to suppress student rioting over the weekend. When the shooting ceased, and the guardsmen had retreated back to their perimeter line, Big Mike found Tom Grace, bloody and lying in agony. He picked him up and carried him in his arms to Prentice Hall, a nearby student dormitory, where Grace received emergency medical attention.

Gary and I got to the Newman Center early. The only person there when we arrived was Guy Fermetti (or something like that), who was tuning up his guitar in preparation for his part in the memorial service (he sang, in a soft voice, “Here Comes the Sun,” by George Harrison). Guy was a Vietnam vet from Texas, who somehow ended up as a student at Kent State. His first day on Campus was May 4, 1970, and he has lived in Kent ever since.

Tom Grace came in while we were chatting with Guy, carrying a large vase filled with wild flowers, which he placed on a piano bench next to an enlarged, poster size photo of Mike Brock as a young man, sporting a walrus mustache and black shaggy hair and sitting on the front stoop of an old house with his pet dog, a big golden retriever. Tom introduced himself to

me and said hi to Gary, whom he already knew from Gary's previous visits to Kent. Nice guy. Short, slender, thoughtful, soft-spoken and loyal. I think he was the only one at the service who wore a tie. He still walks with a pronounced limp from a National Guard bullet that shattered his ankle on May 4th.

Others began filtering in, a small gathering of about 35–40 mourners in all. Did you ever see “The Big Chill?” It reminded me of that. Gary and I were deliberately there early so we could see people come in and try to figure out who was who. The service was not conducted in the Newman Chapel but in the “social hall” (which, I am told by a reliable source, Protestants usually refer to as the “fellowship hall”). Gary and I helped Tom set up folding chairs facing an old piano and speaker's lectern. The eulogy was given by Joe Whojamacallit (I used to be so good at remembering names). From the neck up Joe looks like an Old Testament prophet, with sharp facial features, piercing eyes, full head of hair, gray beard and great bushy eyebrows. From the neck down he looks more like a middle-aged mortal. Joe also was on Blanket Hill May 4 and, like Big Mike, faced the guard's guns and went to the aid of another wounded student, Alan Canfora, whose story as a Johnny-come-lately student agitator at Kent State was told in the last chapter of *Fire in the Streets*, by Milton Viorst.

Canfora arrived a little late for the service and wound up sitting behind me and Gary on the last row of folding chairs. He chatted briefly with us but failed to introduce his girl friend, who looked to be in her 20s. The rumor in Kent is that she won't let him party much with his buddies any more, and that Alan has become domesticated.

Sitting in front of us was Gail Roberts, the defiant young woman. In James Michener's book, *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, who threw a bottle at a police cruiser May 1, Friday night on Water Street in downtown Kent, where students were jamming the bars. That helped to fuel a riot, causing the Kent Chief of Police (whose daughter is now the manager of the Inn of Kent, where Gary and I typically stay in our periodic visits) to urge Mayor LeRoy Satrom to call for the National Guard.

Gary also suspects that Gail might have had something to do with the burning down of the ROTC building on campus the following night, or at least knows who did. We interviewed Gail several years ago (I think I gave you copies of the interview), and she has kept in touch with Gary through e-mail. When Gary asked her why she was wearing an old blue and white striped knit hat to the memorial service, she whipped it off and showed us her shaved head. We declined to ask why her hair was cut so short, but she smiled broadly anyway and volunteered to say that at least she had more hair than we did, which was an irrefutable fact. Gail is a lawyer in Akron now, but I'm not sure who her clients are. I think she does a lot of *pro bono* work for lower income people, who otherwise get railroaded by the legal system.

We saw Howie Emmer and Bill Andrews come in and sit down on the other side of the room. Bill was another student who confronted the guard on May 4 and was guilty, as a police report at the time said, of "throwing a tree" at the guard (it was a tree branch). Bill was one of twenty-five students who were indicted for riot and other related offenses by the Portage County Grand Jury. He fled the state and hid out with friends in Pennsylvania for a few weeks, but decided to turn himself in. He eventually was acquitted but did time waiting for trial in the county jail. According to Gail, his nickname while in jail became "Free-Me Bill." Today, Bill teaches high school in an inner city, Cleveland ghetto. In the 1980s he went to Vietnam for a year so he could personally apologize to the Vietnamese people for the Vietnam War. Five or six years ago Gary and I went with Bill to a bar on lake Erie, and he almost got us into a fight defending a black kid, who he thought was being picked on by some blue collar red necks.

Howie Emmer was not in Kent on the day of the shootings. He had been kicked out of school and banned by court order from stepping foot on the campus for his part in organizing and carrying out a number of highly disruptive actions at Kent in protest of the war the previous year. Howie led the local Kent SDS chapter and was instrumental in recruiting

Joan Carter into taking an active role in the Kent State SDS (I also sent you our interviews with Joan).

Joan, as you may remember, was the speaker I got Rick Scott to invite to UCA a couple of years ago to give an Honors College lecture on students and social change. Like Howie Emmer, Joan was off campus the day of the shootings. Her angry father had ordered her home the year before because of her political activism and neglect of her studies. After disobeying her parents again by hooking up for a short sojourn in a revolutionary commune in Columbus, Ohio Joan began distancing herself from active involvement in radical politics, went to graduate school for a Ph.D. in English literature, married a symphony composer, and now teaches at Case Western Reserve University in a Cleveland suburb.

After leaving Kent in 1969, Howie also joined the same revolutionary commune in Columbus. Unlike Joan, however, he eventually went underground with the Weatherman faction of SDS. Today he teaches third grade to Hispanic kids in a Chicago ghetto. Several years ago Gary tried to contact Emmer through Joan about granting us an interview, but he declined on the grounds that we might, however naively and innocently, be used as dupes for the FBI's on-going investigation and surveillance of old student radicals.

As soon as Big Mike's memorial service ended, we split up, and Gary made a beeline over to talk with Howie (who ended up cautiously agreeing to interview with us at some unspecified time in the future). In the meantime, I found Bill Andrews talking to Jerry Lewis, the retired sociology professor who first proposed the annual Kent State candle light vigil and associated commemorative events in 1971, the year after the shootings. In middle age, Bill is a big, bald-headed man and is a very funny, entertaining guy. He started to get into an argument, however, with the one black person attending the memorial, a gray haired male wearing a wiry beard and an African dashiki by the name of Scotty. I had never heard of Scotty before, but apparently he also had been a student at Kent some time before the shootings. Scotty is a Vietnam vet, and he and

Bill were arguing about whether war protestors blamed U.S. soldiers for the war. Bill said no, only Johnson, Nixon, McNamara, et al were blamed—but not the soldiers. Scotty said “Bull shit! I was there man, don’t tell me what it was like to come back home from Nam!”

I was starting to get a little nervous when Gail Roberts sauntered over and changed the conversation. She said she needed a smoke and wanted to go outside. I went with her, and Scotty came along to bum cigarettes. We sat on a bench in the freezing wind while Scotty and Gail chain smoked and complained about how biased the news media were. I don’t know what specific, recent news story provoked that harangue, but it wasn’t too hard to agree with Gail’s scathing critique. My teeth were chattering, but, by taking us outside, Gail had deftly defused Bill and Scotty’s recriminating argument about the war that had scarred them both in different ways.

Mark Pacifico was also at the service, but he didn’t stay after to visit. Instead, he hurried off to help Kassy Hogan (who is now his wife) make final preparations for the commemorative May 4 events scheduled to begin at noon on the campus commons adjacent to Blanket Hill and the Victory Bell, which was to be solemnly rung at 12:24, the moment in time when the Ohio National Guard fired their fatal fusillade 32 years ago. The Victory Bell, by the way, was the fateful site where Kent Students gathered to hold their rally in protest of the Nixon administration’s expansion of the war in Cambodia. General Robert Canterbury, commanding General of the Guard, determined that the rally was an illegal gathering and ordered his men, with tear gas and fixed bayonets, to clear the field of dissident students, pushing them over Blanket Hill to the day’s deadly denouement on the other side of Taylor Hall.

Mark arrived as a freshman student at Kent State a year after the shootings and immediately became involved in ongoing radical student politics at Kent. Although he was an east coast, city boy from New York, Mark stayed on in Kent, continuing to take occasional classes in school and holding a variety of different jobs in the area. Mark remained a committed po-

litical activist throughout the reactionary Reagan years, but he probably stayed put in Kent because he fell in love with Kassy, who is ten years his junior.

Kassy, born and raised in Virginia, first came to Kent in 1980 as part of a college touring production of a play about the Kent State shootings. Kassy played the part of Allison Krause, one of the four students who was killed by the guard, and she so strongly identified with the role that it changed her life. Right away she met Alan Canfora and fell in love. She thought they were going to get married, but Alan eventually finked out on her. Subsequently, like Mark, Kassy stayed in Kent to become actively involved in the struggle to build a monument to the slain students on campus and secure university support for May 4 memorial events. (Until quite recently the KSU administration has had antagonistic relations with the May 4th Committee, a student organization which Kassy and Mark both unofficially advise and continue to actively participate in.)

After years of carrying a flame for the fickle Alan Canfora, Kassy's heart finally succumbed to Mark's attentions, and they married five years ago. Kassy works in a costume store in Kent, and Mark, who ended up with a master's degree in biology and extensive computer experience, is currently working as a telephone pollster in a job that he hates. But it pays for his cigarettes, pizza, and coffee, all of which he refuses to give up, even though he had a heart attack six months ago. Kassy's health is fine, but she does like her beer.

Well, it's an interesting bunch. There were many others at the memorial service whom I didn't know or didn't get a chance to visit with. Life goes on, but for these people their subsequent histories and personal identities were fundamentally transformed by the events that occurred in a little Ohio town over three decades ago. Did their fateful choices and actions—during a profoundly divisive period of crisis in America—make any difference in anybody else's life besides their own? In spite of their youthful years, were they bold actors participating in the construction of history, producing searing moral lessons (or cautionary tales) for the benefit of future

generations of Americans? Or were they simply naïve and idealistic victims of their time and place, pulled into a maelstrom of larger societal contradictions and conflicts beyond their ken to adequately comprehend or change, with little meaningful legacy to offer us now in the 21st Century?

You'll have to come with me to Kent some time. I'd like that.

*Here comes the sun, here comes the sun
it's been a long cold lonely winter
it feels like years since it's been here
the smiles returning to the faces
I feel that ice is slowly melting
it seems like years since it's been clear
Here comes the sun, here comes the sun,
and I say it's all right
It's all right*