

Standing Left

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A faint scent of pepper spray in the breeze; someone, somewhere is getting their money's worth. I hadn't come prepared for this: knee-high plastic boots and a large 10 cent garbage-bag, strategically cut so that it can be worn as a raincoat, that's all! Nothing more needed. Not a great look I know: black sheet plastic from neck to knee, black rubber from knee to toe. I look a little like a homeless SS officer. As odd as it might seem, this is a shrewd calculation – lazy, scruffy and ill-coordinated fits the scene here.

When I first joined this hodgepodge group of protestors, it was for a pro-union rally at a pathetic, and ultimately doomed, little steel mill. I dressed appropriately, or so I thought. My pants, bought a month prior, still had their shape and colour; I wore socks, underwear, sensible shoes and a thick winter jacket. I realised my mistake immediately; my new friends were so subversive, anti-establishment... radical, that my functional choice of clothes made me appear as a reptile in their nest. Looking back now, well over twenty five years ago, perhaps this was the first indicator of my current melancholia, the first internal fizz of my crisis of personality... sorry correct that, ideology.

Again, pepper spray! It is actually quite pleasant when diluted and casually inhaled, rather than smeared across the face in a thick orange paste. Water, formulated eye drops, vomiting and a lengthy cry will get you back and functioning within twenty minutes of even the most intense, close-range 'spit in the face' (as we have come to call it). I have no water and no eye drops; like I said, I did not come prepared for a riot, only a brief stroll in the countryside. This was, on paper at least, a non-event: a weekday march, through an out-of-the-way field, protesting a parochial issue: genetically modified foods... no one cares about GM foods anymore. I am

surprised that the police bothered to turn up at all, let alone go through all the hassle of breaking the seals on their canisters.

The cayenne air is drifting in from the other side of this hill, and the crowd, small as it is, have caught the scent. A familiar look of panic and excitement decorates their faces as they begin to surge forward hoping for a moment of conflict, the chance to feel righteous; perhaps the chance to get on TV. The hill is barely noticeable, but we are all badly out of shape so it is becoming a struggle. In the crowd of red, sweaty, bloated faces I stand out. Not because I am in better health, or have taken better care of myself over the years – I am as fat and sickly as everyone else here – but because, in the midst of the bedlam around me, I am the only person not moving.

I have had enough of all this. Not the chaos, not the people, not long trips to shitty fields; I am done with the Left. For the past year or so I have been on autopilot, attending rally-after-rally, protest-after-protest like a vacant wife having sex with her husband out of habit and duty; because anything less would indicate outwardly what she feels internally; because abstaining would break the illusion and force an uncomfortable change.

I am of the Left! It is a strange way to describe political attachment I know, but we are strange creatures. I have always been of the Left! As a politically motivated teenager, it seemed like the only choice. The few people in our high school who openly associated with Right wing politics were serious beyond their years, militaristic in dress and haircuts and, above all else, boring. Needless to say they never got laid. The Left was free, radical and unregimented – we were going to change the world; we cared, we had girls, we had sex! Easy choice.

Once in college I rapidly grew into my political clothes, and how nicely they fit! I stopped calling myself Leftist in favour of the more descriptive 'liberal'. In those days the Left was still too closely associated with communism, and I was born ten years too late to happily bear that cross: repeating desperately "we have been corrupted by individuals, but the idea is still sound". How tragic this seemed, pretending the waters were not rising around them. I

celebrated when the wall came down, I read and reread *The End of History*; I fawned over Chomsky and threw myself into university politics – comfortable, confident, proud... annoying.

There is something immensely satisfying about knowing you are right, and I knew I was right. How could I not be? I was against racism, colonialism, imperialism and greed; I was for gender equality, human rights – animal rights for that matter – freedom, and empowerment – god did I wear that word out. Gay rights weren't so popular back then, but I knew that I would be for that too. All-in-all, a kinder, happier world.

That pack-animal of a human being that just bludgeoned her way past me, knuckles dragging, neck arched like a grizzly bear, love handles protruding as her unwashed t-shirt rides up her swollen belly, is Karen. We met in college at a sit-in protest over the first Gulf War. She wasn't quite so visually upsetting back then, but her personality was. Her brand of social concern manifested only as seething, indignant anger. Hunched cross-legged outside the Vice-Chancellor's office – trying desperately to impress a petite, plain looking, yet not unattractive, naïve brunette with my memorized collection of talking-points about the West's role in cementing Saddam Hussein in power – Karen announced herself in grand cock-blocking fashion.

Bursting through the crowd (she was good at it back then too), Karen turned our peaceful gathering violent, lobbing a brick through the window of the central administration block. The brunette left in tears, and we all spent the next few weeks trying to justify the brick-incident as a 'reasonable response to the international bullying and oppression then being rained down on Iraq', and dreaming up alibis for all our members present at the time, including Karen. So I got to know Karen quite well... never really liked her though. Her foaming-mouth, wrecking-ball style of righteousness was all too intense for me... and I never quite forgave her for ruining what I am still convinced was a sure thing.

I suppose, even back then I sensed that something was wrong. My Saddam routine – my cleverly phrased and well-practiced history of the Iraqi state, the rise of the Ba'ath Party and the West's long-standing support for Saddam Hussein – didn't quite explain why I was now

protesting an American war against Saddam in defence of a helpless, invaded Arab neighbour. As I imagined myself standing hand-in-hand with the Iraqi people, why was I standing against the Kuwaitis' right to be free from Saddam's aggression? I was willing to support Iraqi imperialism in order to oppose the American variety.

This small stone of unease was difficult to kick. However discovering hypocrisy is like glimpsing a magician's trick or receiving divine revelation; all else just tends to fade away. And in those days hypocrisy was easy to find... I just didn't notice my own. 'America the great humanitarian' was at the same time 'America the supporter of dictators'. And how easy the arguments were: a smug listing of the various inconsistencies and Machiavellian decisions of Western powers; sit back arms folded; resting easy; happy applause from an already sold audience; intellectual gratification; end of moral analysis! How badly I needed someone to push me, if only a little bit. Someone to turn the spotlight into my eyes and ask: "why are you demanding consistency from countries that – as you say – have depraved histories? Isn't a little new-found hypocrisy a good thing in such circumstances? Are the immoral never allowed to be moral again?"

Mind you, if someone had, I was primed and ready: they were self-deceiving, Arab hating, lovers of war. And with people like Karen around, I imagined myself as not only correct, not only virtuous, but also as occupying the considered, compromised, reasonable, moderate ground. Twelve years later, with another Bush in the White House, and another Iraq war, we had a new word to silence our opposition: "Islamophobia!"

The pepper spray hasn't managed to knock me out of my stupor, but the smell is getting stronger and more consistent; I still haven't moved. The crowd has now progressed over the hill, leaving me alone in the dewy air. Whatever it is that's happening over there, I don't want to know; it is not tempting in the least. The uninspiring chants of "NO GMO" are now steadily being drowned out by frantic screams and cries of "police brutality". When you hear this being shouted, bet the house that it is not actually happening.

Like 'racist!', 'misogynist!', 'Islamophobe!', it is often just a label; designed to scare, to suck the oxygen out of a room, to let you know that I am not a balanced person and will cause you

immeasurable problems. “Police brutality...police brutality...police brutality...police brutality”. Ha, please! If anyone of us ever really felt the wrong end of a police overreaction, you would find us quivering and broken; foetal positions, loose bladders and looking for a change of hobby. We wouldn’t last a single day suffering for a cause – we are weekend protestors, and we like our social justice *a la carte*.

Only John has remained behind with me... the coward! Alone in a field with a frightened, middle-aged homosexual – what a way to spend a Thursday afternoon. John is one of those gay men that doesn’t announce it, but neither does he hide it, thereby making us all very uncomfortable in the first few months after joining our little group. On the Left we take pride in our tolerance and acceptance, so much so that we insist on rubbing it in people’s faces. We are desperate to make public shows of the diversity that we feel inside. So John was a problem. How can you be tolerant of someone who is so comfortable with who they are that they don’t give you a chance to acknowledge their minority, oppressed status? Such high hopes, such a disappointment.

We all dreamt of a flamboyant John, dressed in drag, screaming his sexual exploits as he twirled around a light post, offending passers-by as he headed a gay pride march. What we got was a calm introvert, ambivalent about gay rights; passionate about feminism. Strange, I know! We all tried our hands psychoanalysing this behaviour: self-hate; insecurity; self-denial; shyness. Eventually, and depressingly, we just had to accept it.

The John we got, rather than the John we wanted, was the chemotherapy for the cancer we didn’t know we had. Before John’s arrival women’s issues were non-issues. We had strangely, and almost entirely, neglected such causes – none of us were aware of just how rich the vein of feminist outrage still was. I had personally dismissed it as a solved problem, one to chalk-up in the success column of Left wing causes. How wrong I was! Within a month, John had dragged us out on two marches and a well-managed picket in the heart of the financial district – almost immediately our membership doubled. Our meetings were suddenly swamped by a strange, new clone-like demographic of young, dumpy, spectacled women. It was as if every women’s

studies major had suddenly abandoned their degrees (a wise move in itself) in favour of our niche protest group.

At first I was excited. Increased numbers, meant an increase in legitimacy; not to mention personal satisfaction. Also, they were women; and not all of them unattractive. Though as it turns out, I never got around to making a move on any of them. I mean I would have; I had every intention. However after a few brief flirtations, disguised as inquisitive, eager-to-learn conversations, I changed my mind. It was as if they all had trip-wires in their minds, primed to go off at the slightest misstep. It felt like one unwelcome hand on the wrong shoulder and they would have me up on sexual assault charges. It was just too risky; plus they had sucked all the life out of romance.

Things only got worse from there. I had expected feminists of the type that I remembered: you know, the common-sense variety. What turned up was something entirely different. This new generation spoke about “inherent privilege”, “male apartheid” and “gender genocide”. Every allegation they made needed a translation. Come to think of it, looking back now, I don’t remember any of them ever using the word ‘equality’. We went on ‘slut walks’ and demanded the ‘freeing of the nipple’; men were evil, especially the nice ones.

Trotting up behind us, late as ever, is Annabelle. And that poor emasculated creature that she is dragging along with her like a leashed dog, is Mark. In a sea of non-descript, amorphous feminist bodies, Annabelle stands out. Her face sharply angled like a runway model; rich, wavy blonde hair, matched with fierce jet black eyes and eyebrows; she is unnaturally striking; the sort of person that you just can’t help staring at. And this genetic good luck really seems to piss her off. Surrounded by an orchestra of voices, all chanting about how the ‘male patriarchy reduces women to their appearance’, she is the only one, as far as I can see, for whom this is true; men really do objectify her... women too.

Mark, her timid, beaten pet, is a Ghanaian immigrant. Short, handsome and quintessentially athletic – soon he’ll take his shirt off, he always finds a way. At some point in the future, in a cheap psychologist’s office, I imagine Mark will come to understand that his permanently bare

torso was a subversive form of expression; the only outlet for his identity considering that Annabelle almost never allows him to speak.

They acknowledge John and myself with cold, indifferent nods, and stroll defiantly over the hill dragging a white sign with the words “Kill All GM Farmers” sloppily scrawled in red paint. This is Annabelle’s go-to phrase: normally it reads “Kill All White Men”. The stipulation ‘white’ always seemed a little unnecessary, like she was mixing up her causes – but I definitely wasn’t going to mention this; it wouldn’t end well... I had already learnt this lesson.

On a miserably wet autumn evening, not long after our feminist influx, I found myself playing the Good Samaritan and taxiing home five or six of our members...women...half-naked... from a failed attempt at disrupting a graduation ceremony at a local university. They were, as far as I could understand, trying to take a stand against ‘rape culture on campus’... strange that they couldn’t get any of the women actually enrolled at the institute to join them. Regardless, they had gotten their dates wrong. What a sight they must have been: topless and shivering in what was persistent, frigid rain, with the words “This Is Not An Invitation” scrawled across their breasts, as they walked aimlessly around campus, asking directions to an event that wasn’t happening.

By the time I pulled up at the main entrance of the university, they were huddled together in an empty bus shelter fighting back tears of disappointment. No sooner had they caught sight of my car than they rushed onto the street, frantically waving me down like castaways with a signal fire. And I was genuinely sympathetic until they pushed themselves – wet, naked and overcrowded – into my new Lexus without bothering to ask if I was ok with the damage to my seats or the legal liability. So when they began muttering about some truly extraordinary statistics – “1-in-4 women who attend Western universities will be victims of sexual assault” – I began to tentatively push back.

This, as a matter of common-sense, just had to be overblown. During my own college days I remembered reading that in Rwanda during the genocide, where rape was used as a weapon of war, the number peaked at 1-in-12. Three times more likely to be sexually assaulted at college

than in a lawless warzone... come on! No serious person could believe this. I mean what parent would send their daughter to a Western campus knowing that she only had a 75 percent chance of avoiding a serious sexual assault? Sure women were suffering around the world, but on the whole, it wasn't the people I saw around me living in peaceful, tolerant, liberal, human rights respecting, democracies.

Their white frozen cheeks were now flushing red. My feminist audience exited the car just as quickly as they had entered, this time in search of a "safe space"; the only straggler, Brianna, took a moment to explain that my speech was nothing but a long series of "micro-aggressions". I still don't know what either of these terms mean, and none of the women have spoken to me since.

Looking across at John, I wonder how many false starts he had in his own coming-out process? How many times did he get close to abandoning his heterosexual veneer only to be scared back into silence by the initial reactions of unwelcoming onlookers? Looking down for a moment I notice that we are wearing the same boots...mine are a little muddier. Does this mean I have good taste? Or perhaps I'm just a little effeminate?

Annabelle is coming back over the hill... Mark is nowhere to be seen; she is running. The chants and screams are now being interspersed with the barking of dogs. John starts backing away. Police dogs at a poorly organised, insignificant GM rally? What on earth could possibly be happening over that hill? More people are now fumbling their way back towards me, panic across their faces.

I haven't seen this kind of fear since we marched through the city's commercial hub in a large, conglomerated protest against the Israeli occupation. Ah Israel! The one issue that can reliably forge all Leftist groups together in collective outrage. Violence was inevitable as we all tried to out-compete each other to see who could come across as the most concerned; and what better way to express this than with anger? Anger is eye-grabbing... it's rebellious... it's fun. So there we were, the football hooligans of our age, burning down the world for the simple pleasure of it, and justifying everything by those who we were opposed to.

Running clashes filled the streets, stores were looted, cars turned over, barricades built, police attacked; for a brief few hours we embodied our cause, turning our modern, civilized city into down-town Ramallah. They brought in the dogs then too! They worked then too! The image of a snarling animal seems to set off something primal inside; a single dog can clear a hundred protestors without ever leaving the leash.

I have to admit that I was all too caught up in the mayhem to pause and think about what I was doing, about who I was aligning myself with. After the excitement a small group of us gathered for a celebratory binge-drink in a dingy out-of-the-way pub with just the right anti-establishment atmosphere; someone turned on the TV. There we were: chest-beating, loud and proud...within a sea of green flags. The sharp Arabic writing – the Shahada (There is no god but God. Muhammad is the message) – didn't need translation, it is all too familiar these days, and we all knew what it meant given the context. It wasn't an innocuous proselytization of Islam; it was Hamas! However, my drinking buddies seemed to barely notice. Hamas were against Israel and so were we; friends-of-friends... enemies-of-enemies; we were in a fight so any ally would do. Cosying-up with an organisation that publically calls for the destruction of Israel was a stretch too far for me. I was against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and their expanding settlement program; however, I did not think that the punishment for this should be another genocide of the Jewish people.

And surely Israeli crimes in the West Bank didn't justify Hamas knee-capping and executing their political opponents miles away in Gaza; nor did it excuse their failure to hold elections, the use of civilians as human shields, the constant firing of rockets into Israel, the failure to uphold even basic human rights, or the building of tunnels rather than schools and hospitals... not all victims are righteous! Hamas had been abandoned by Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, even Egypt, why should their last remaining friends be Western liberals? Condemning Israel whilst embracing Hamas? This was lazy...worse, immoral. It was sparing the greater evil in order to condemn the lesser. If any of my women-liberating, minority-respecting, gay-empowering, secular friends suddenly found themselves dropped into Palestine, they would immediately,

and fearing for their own safety, ask for directions to Israel: the only democratic, rule of law-respecting country in the region.

I began drinking with a little more vigour; as bad as the images were, I knew they would get worse. With dread flooding down over my rapidly numbing body, there they were! A swastika caught the eye, another read “Behead the Jews” – our booth began to fall silent. “Sharia Law is the Only Law”; “Strike at the Necks of the Infidels”. How had I not seen these signs at the time? Tom, a thick bodied, thick necked, ginger haired computer programmer brought everyone back to topic and back to life, pointing out that in the corner of the screen a police officer, dressed head to toe in riot gear, had just shoved a young protestor to the ground. And just like that we were back to talking about police brutality. The neo-fascist hate escaped unmentioned; happily forgotten. Perhaps we all needed a little more than a shove; perhaps some real, authority-imposed violence might have done us some good. I couldn’t understand why, in the name of tolerance, we were embracing such an unconcealed and unashamed hatred. If those signs weren’t going to shake us awake, then what possibly could? We were in bed with the most repressive elements of our society, yet we called ourselves “progressives”.

Surmounting the hill, looking very proud of itself, is a border collie. A farm dog! They were running from a farm dog! “Rupert”...“Rupert”; evidently its name is Rupert, and someone is none-to-pleased with him. A high-pitched whistle sprays-out over the landscape; Rupert – message received – scurries away out of sight. Technically we are all trespassing, so I guess we should be thankful that it was Rupert and not an irate farmer with a shotgun that scared us away. Phillip – a collapsing structure of a man, feet and knees turned so far inward that walking seems like a violation of physics; whose skeletal structure appears unbearably strained as he drags around his watery sack of a body – has turned hysterical: “why didn’t the police stop the dog?”...“he could be rabid”...“they better charge the owner for improper care”.

At my feet, trampled into the mud is a poorly constructed, now shattered, sign that reads “We Are Not Your Science Experiments”. Well stated! This is the crux of the GM uproar. About 20 years ago, large agrochemical and biotechnology companies began modifying the food that we eat: seedless melons, tomatoes that don’t need pesticides, rice that requires less water to

produce, carrots that repel rodents, bigger, brighter apricots. Sounds good, right? Well, the problem was that potential side-effects of such genetic changes were never properly considered, and no one informed the public that this was happening to their food. We were the lab rats! Now, from what I understand this wasn't quite as insidious as it might sound, after all, genetic variation had always been present in our food by virtue of DNA recombination and genetic mutation. Did anyone ever lose sleep over this? Still, even if we were to accept these concerns at face value – that was 20 years ago. Enough time has passed; the experiment is over; no adverse effects to report. To be accurate the sign should read: "Please Apologise for Once Making Us Your Science Experiments".

But still, here we are in this miserable field, trotting out an antiquated, self-refuting argument... and upsetting Rupert in the process. It felt the same when Bush Jr. was limbering-up to complete his father's failed legacy and we were forced to turn our attention back to Iraq. Suddenly we were mainstream: the largest ever recorded protest in our nation's history saw us marching next to moderates, conservatives, even the far-Right. It seems no one wanted Saddam gone... no one except me.

I mean considering that we had the power to remove him, how could we, in all good conscience, let him stay? If he hadn't done enough to warrant this, then what was the threshold? Saddam had invaded his neighbours, he had welcomed and protected international terrorists, he had used chemical weapons on his own people, he had tried to annihilate the Kurds, and he had constructed a 'slave state' on a par with modern-day North Korea. And, by and large, the Western world had supported him every step of the way. If this was Western imperialism – which I still believe it was – then surely removing him and returning a democratic Iraqi state to its citizens was the ultimate anti-imperialist act. WMDs aside, it just seemed like the right thing to do. Any lingering doubts that I might have had were erased when I saw the jubilation on the streets, when I saw the statues coming down, when I saw the children cheering-on the invading troops, when I saw a people free to publicly express themselves for the first time in their lives... I don't cry too often, but I did when I saw this.

But I had never felt so alone... and I'm weak! The rancid girth of the moral majority weighed down upon me with a little too much pressure. I sucked myself back up inside, and marched against what I thought was moral, what I thought was liberal.

The crowd is now slowly re-forming around me. Perhaps they have misunderstood my statuesque pose for steadfast courage – feels nice nonetheless; like being embraced and respected at the same time. Phillip is next to me now, still visibly upset by his run-in with Rupert. When did We on the Left become so timid, so short of resilience and mettle; so lacking in character. Which way around is it: are strong people attracted to the Right, or do Right wing ideas build strength? Why are we stuck nursing the fragile back to health? Why are we stuck with Phillip? And John... well I don't even know where he is anymore, on the freeway back home no doubt; careful not to break the speed limit though.

We weren't always this way. We once stood against tyranny, against domination by the strong; we stood for freedom and a universal, cosmopolitan ethic. We refused to abandon the world to the caprice of despots and warlords. And then, somehow, we became pacifists; we revered Gandhi and the Dalai Lama; we spoke about peace, we hoped for it... but refused to fight for it. Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and East Timor were all bad; but not quite as bad as intervening to stop the violence was. When Gaddafi announced to the world that he would "cleanse Libya house-by-house" with "rivers of blood", we condemned him, yet not as much as we did the Western intervention that saved the people of Benghazi. Western bombs in North Africa... it just looked and felt a little too much like imperialism. Somewhere along the way we had stopped arguing for ideas and values; we stopped judging people by what they did and said. Instead we made a map of the territory in our minds, labelled our enemies in advance and treated any second thoughts or deeper analysis as demonstrations of bigotry; bricking-up the prison walls around us.

For a long time I felt like an apostate. A traitor to my cause; a fifth columnist just waiting for the right moment to abandon my friends for a better, easier life. Now I am certain that it is the other way around: I stood still! They moved!

Adrian – an unbelievably obese man in his early 20's, with a perfectly circular face, eyes forced into a squint by the invading facial fat, layers of blubber snaking around his torso, tits swinging like pendulums, (he must get his clothes custom made) – is now trying to comfort Phillip with an oddly erotic shoulder massage. His grotesque, sweat soaked belly is smearing across Phillip's back; if Phillip wasn't upset before, he must be now. I am amazed that in Adrian's young life he has had enough time to eat that much food. Such extreme size is surely an old man's game, taking decades of dedication. He cannot have a long, nor a satisfying future ahead of him. None of us – his apparently caring friends – will say anything though; there will be no intervention... because that would be 'body shaming'.

Still it continues, and with an expanded vigour: Adrian's thick arthritic fingers rolling sensually over the neck and shoulders and lower back of a now, frozen stiff, Phillip. However, no one is paying much attention to this Victorian freak show – Karen is occupying their minds. Standing at the head of the crowd, fist raised defiantly in the air reminiscent of a Black Panther salute, she is attempting to rally us for a face-saving return to the front line. I can't smell the pepper spray anymore, I wonder if the police are still here? Perhaps they tired and went home; smart move! Their presence here really only helps us; allowing us to go to bed at night, smug in the belief that we are still relevant.

It was no St Crispin's, but it seems to have worked! Slowly; timidly they are dragging themselves forward. There is nothing triumphant or defiant about this: their blank, passive faces betray a weariness, perhaps even a disillusionment. Kept obedient by the ambient peer pressure, there they go: trudging away like wives returning to their abusive husbands. This doesn't seem like a sensible decision... after all, Rupert is somewhere over that hill. I think I'll stay here!