

BREAKING FREE
A Novel about the Sixties
by
Sylvia Hart Wright

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PROLOGUE

I look for her, the girl I used to be, in an old film of a Berkeley march they're showing on TV. In that tumult of protest, I look for her. Remembering, the ache and the passion come back.

How we stormed through the streets with our posters and banners, our friends and lovers at our sides. Across the Pacific, an undeclared war was savaging other friends and sisters, brothers and lovers. So down those Berkeley streets we marched, afire with rage against powerful men of tainted vision who in the name of democracy were sending American kids with important growing up to do, to visit plagues on a jungle land whose name at first we scarcely knew. In time they'd lose that war, those men of overweening power, to the under-armed, slight warriors of Vietnam. But first they'd wreak havoc on us all and on the bleeding conscience of the world.

Time has ground on. Should I care that I've earned some laurels that might argue my life has mattered a bit? I look for that girl I used to be. And for Ian, most tragic of all I came to know in the peace movement, and for my sweet friend Joanne, irreverent and strong. For Bill whose fate would twine unexpectedly with mine and for Gary, that husky enigma of a man who romped to adventure across a continent.

I don't look for Ray, though in those days I was helpless tinder to the flint of him. By 1965 and this march I'm watching, my lover Ray had absented himself. I don't look either for my Black Panther friends. I'd come to know them later and thousands of miles away.

But now on that flickering screen that melds truth and illusion, a face fleets by—not my face but so like mine in those days: a bawdy Joan of Arc with soft Mediterranean features framed by a cascade of dark curly hair. A face fleets by, glowing with idealism, and suddenly I'm standing on Telegraph Avenue and the air is crisp with fall and soon I'll join this march.

CHAPTER 1

I went to meet Joanne early outside a Mexican restaurant a few blocks from campus down Telegraph Avenue. Like me she was in her mid-twenties then, and medium height, slightly taller than me. The Vietnam Day Committee had called the march for 7:30; the two of us were planning to go on it together. Soon I spotted Joanne down the block, waving and smiling.

"Let me see your sign," she said as soon as she'd ambled up to me.

I held up the satiric poster I'd made and tacked to a wooden slat:

GENOCIDE ISN'T RIGHT
EVEN WHEN THEY
AREN'T WHITE

"Terrific, Elise, you tell 'em," she said. "Isn't it revolting? All you hear on the news is body counts, as if we should all be jumping for joy to hear how many Vietcong 'our side' claims to have slaughtered. And you just know they're killing old people and women and children

too!"

"Yeah," I said, leading the way into the restaurant, "it makes me crazy the way they call them gooks, like they aren't really human. Every time I see a car with one of those damn bumper stickers—you know, 'Bomb North Vietnam into the Stone Age'—I feel like stoning it, let alone stoning the driver."

I propped my sign up against the wall beside our table. I ordered cheese enchiladas, she ordered the combination plate, then the two of us started helping ourselves to the tortilla chips and salsa on the table.

"So," she asked me, "you ambitious creature, how's your graduate work going?"

I was going for my PhD in sociology at UC Berkeley.

"Been working on a paper about the children of single parents," I told her as I savored the salsa, too sharp but delicious. "Lots of delinquents come from backgrounds like that so naturally it's fashionable for sociologists—mostly men, of course—to say these kids get into trouble because they come from broken homes. But I've been digging into the statistics and it turns out that most of them live with their mothers and most of their mothers are broke and they have to live in shitty neighborhoods. And—here's the kicker—if you match families for income and neighborhood, it turns out that these kids are no more delinquent than the usual run."

Joanne flicked a stray lock of her long, sun-streaked brown hair behind one ear. "So if their mothers are middle class, they'll probably do all right?"

"Provided they don't run into housing discrimination for some other reason."

"Like if they're black?"

"Right," I said, sipping my water in self defense against the salsa. Joanne laughed.

"Ray would be proud of you, old socialist and freedom rider that he is. Hear anything from him lately?"

I shrugged. "He doesn't even send me postcards anymore."

"Ever think of trotting on down to Guadalajara and visiting him?"

"Sure, I used to, all the time—but first he was too busy and then he just wasn't interested. And there's a limit to how much I can crawl for that man."

The waiter brought our food; I peered down at my enchiladas. Despite my best intentions, every time I ate Mexican food I couldn't help wishing that Ray was sitting across the table from me.

"So how's Moose?" I asked.

"Simple-minded as ever."

When first I'd met her three years before at the Berkeley peace center, Joanne had been happily married to Jim Palumbo, who worked there full time. I'd been volunteering at the center fifteen hours a week; I used to run into her there every few days. But around the time Ray moved to Mexico, Joanne had walked out on Jim and left Petie, their kid, with him. She'd fixed up her own apartment and now and again she let Moose Jencks live there with her. He was a craggy-faced drifter with no intellectual pretensions, wildly different from her often cerebral husband.

"So what else is happening in your life these days?" Joanne asked me. "Seeing anyone special?"

I shrugged. "This town's full of men—most of them looking to get laid."

I wasn't bragging but I wasn't complaining either. I'd never thought I was especially pretty; I looked a lot more exotic than I wanted to. Still I knew I had a body that turned men on: full breasted and narrow waisted with a dancer's proud posture and lots of energy. Lately here in Berkeley, now that I wasn't coupled off with Ray, horny swains kept appearing who wanted me to prove to them how liberated I was. In self defense I'd coined the response, "You don't have freedom without the freedom to say no." But then again, there were the times when I got horny myself.

"The reason I asked—Bill Tibbett was asking about you. Like he wondered if I could give him your number."

"Sure, what the hell. Why not?"

I'd known Bill casually for a couple of years. He seemed like a good enough sort—though the torch I was still carrying for Ray made other guys look kind of shadowy.

The waiter came by again. We paid the check. I reclaimed my sign. Out on Telegraph Avenue the sidewalk was getting crowded with people waiting to join the march or watch it. A

round-shouldered man with a sheepish smile was carrying a huge display card from one knot of people to another. He was trying to sell buttons that said "Support Your Local Police." On this strip of the avenue, folks endured him stonily but did not buy.

From up beyond Sather Gate we could hear the demonstration starting. It rumbled in the distance like a ruffle of drums, then multitudes of marchers started pouring into the street. At first a tentative presence, blocks away. Then closer, filling the gutter, eight to ten abreast while rousing, rowdy music grew louder and louder till a gutbucket band racketed by, playing on the back of a flatbed truck.

Suddenly Joanne rose to her tiptoes and started waving frantically. "Hi, Ian!" she yelled.

A couple of heads turned but I didn't see anyone wave back. Soon those ranks of marchers disappeared from sight.

"Ian who?" I asked her.

"Ian Kellaway, of course. He just got out of jail."

"Ian did? Didn't they just give him ninety days? That was ages ago."

"Yeah, but he fucked up. They extended his sentence." Joanne made a face. "He's not looking too great."

We eased in among strangers a couple of blocks behind the head of the line. A quarter of a mile behind us, a turbulence of marchers was still swarming out from the campus rally through Sather Gate. Jubilation! The dusky streets echoed with jubilation that so many of us were marching together against the war.

For weeks no one had known if this demonstration would come off. The Vietnam Day Committee had set it up for us to march to the Oakland Army Terminal from which, week after week, thousands of soldiers shipped out to 'Nam. A hundred and fifty thousand were sweating and dying there already and the government said it was planning to send another forty thousand troops next month.

So they'd planned to hold a teach-in within the gates of the Terminal. We'd educate draftees about the Nuremberg Trials; we'd tell them that when your government orders you to commit atrocities, it's criminal to docilely obey. But officials said a teach-in like that would be seditious—officials for the whole line of march: Berkeley and Oakland and Alameda County. Still activists kept swarming into town, waiting to march with us Berkeley cadres.

At last the Berkeley police had given us a parade permit. Our march would be peaceable, the VDC promised. No one would attempt civil disobedience. Just in case, they rented five sound trucks and manned them with volunteer medics. They trained one hundred marshals and equipped them with walkie-talkies to march alongside the rest of us. Now at last, we filled the streets for almost a mile.

Tranquil wide streets of pastel houses built for sunny days and snowless winters. Since first I'd set foot here, I'd loved this town. Now we walked these streets in a sacramental hush, sensing that we were making history.

A little boy waved to us from his front yard. Joanne and I smiled and waved back at him. Here and there older people were peering at us from windows.

"What're they scared of?" someone near me asked. "They look at us like we're weird."

Briefly along our darkening route, I walked shoulder to shoulder with a man who wore a World War II army cap on his graying hair. He was carrying a sign he'd lettered himself.

"TO SIN BY SILENCE WHEN THEY SHOULD PROTEST
MAKES COWARDS OF MEN"

— Abraham Lincoln

"I like your sign," I told him.

He said he liked mine too. Then the crowd shifted; the man slipped away. Down block after block we flowed in ever changing configurations.

"Hey, hey, LBJ," we chanted, "how many kids did you kill today?" Gusts of songs arose: "We Shall Overcome," "We Shall Not Be Moved." They grew in volume, then faded into the night. Joanne and I made an effort to stay together. We took turns carrying the sign I'd made.

Not many marchers had brought signs of their own but the VDC had supplied lots of them, brightly lettered in poster paints.

NO MORE

NAPALM

KILL FOR
PEACE?

YANKEE

COME HOME

As we moved further from campus, hecklers appeared on the sidewalk. "Get a haircut," they shouted. "Take a bath." "Bunch of commie slackers." "Go back to Russia." Many had foreign accents that rang strangely in our ears. Most of us marchers were white and middle class and we'd been born here in the US of A.

"They're Hungarians," someone snarled. "Fascist pricks."

We passed them by. The hecklers receded. Our route shifted, leaving Telegraph Avenue behind. We were heading toward the Oakland border. A marshal strolling beside us kept speaking into her walkie-talkie and straining to decipher answers through loudly crackling static.

"What's happening up ahead?" Joanne asked her.

"God only knows," the marshal said.

By now we were wending down side streets, narrowing our lines to accommodate the police so their patrol cars could pass through. At jammed intersections we made way for regular traffic. "Join us!" we called to the drivers, thrusting our posters at them. "Stop the killing! Stop the war!"

In the soft evening, radios twittered—all of them tuned to KPFA's coverage of the protest. "An estimated 15,000 demonstrators Telegrams applauding this action have been received from youth groups in France, Senegal, Italy, Chile Sixteen Hells Angels have been detained by the Oakland police near the Berkeley-Oakland border."

Sixteen Hells Angels. For weeks the Angels had been threatening to beat our leaders up. How, we wondered, would the Oakland cops deal with our sworn enemies?

In Berkeley we hated the Oakland police. They didn't look kindly on hippies and social protest. Oakland itself seemed an alien world, Middle America on the Pacific. And though a quarter of Oakland's population was non-white, almost all its cops were hulking white men—immigrants from Georgia, Alabama, the Carolinas. To us activists, the Oakland police with their hard-eyed, florid faces, their flabby midriffs bulging against their gun belts, recalled Bull Connor's men in Birmingham, rednecks who'd sicced police dogs on Martin Luther King and his peaceful marchers. Now our own march stopped for a moment, becalmed in a side street. From where we stood we couldn't see what lay ahead.

"Car 3 calling Car 1, Car 3 calling Car 1"

Not far from us sat a small VDC sound truck. A young man beside the driver kept talking intently into his two-way radio, then listening for answers too faint for us to make out.

"Do you think we'll get through?" I asked him.

He shrugged. His face looked closed and angry. "Some bastard's jamming our signal," he said.

Up ahead where the route turned and cut diagonally down toward Oakland, nothing seemed to be moving. Oakland lay scarcely three blocks away.

"C'mon," I coaxed Joanne, "let's see what's happening."

I pulled her with me through a crowd of milling people. Demonstrators had started breaking ranks to lean against parked cars, to light cigarets and exchange conjectures. Suddenly from a balcony overhead came the sound of a flute. Its thin music, eerie and sinuous, cut through a faint breeze that had started blowing up from the bay. Under its spell it was hard to remember why so many of us had gathered there together that night.

At the foot of the street, we stopped to get our bearings. One block beyond, three streets came together in a great, flat, wedge-shaped area surrounded by warehouses and secondhand stores. But only dim streetlights flecked the darkness and a crush of marchers blocked our view.

"What's happening?" I asked a shadowy mass of people. Uncertain murmurs seeped from the crowd. Then an outlandish figure started pressing toward us, speaking in a singsong parody of a sideshow barker or a Holy Roller preacher. He waved one hand before him in extravagant spirals.

"Step this way, little lady, step this way, little miss, to whe-e-ah the a-a-action i-i-is."

He was short and stocky, with long chestnut brown braids that wobbled past his shoulders, tied at the end with leather thongs. He was wearing dirty white homespun pants tied with a length of rope at his waist. Over them a fatigue jacket hung open loosely, its lapels and front panel spattered with a grab bag of service ribbons and medals, insignia pins and patches. Among them glistened a swastika and an iron cross. Spotting them, I flushed

with rage even as I tried to remind myself that these symbols probably meant nothing to him. Plenty of people who dressed in outfits as weird as this lived in Haight-Ashbury across the bay.

For a moment I tried to stare him down but the little man with braids just smiled back at me. "Are you *ready*, little lady, are you ready to perceive the wisdom of the ages? Oh sinner, are you ready for the *acid test*?"

At this last phrase, he giggled. In San Francisco, I'd heard, at great chaotic balls called Acid Tests, people came in costume and psychedelic lights flared, rock music played and the punch was spiked with LSD.

"Oh hearken, little lady, hearken unto me and I shall show you a *mystery*, yes ma'am, I shall grant you a revelation for the *chosen few*."

He was waving his hand hypnotically before my eyes. I nerved myself to peer past his hand, to confront the person behind the facade. A pinched, plain face looked out from between his braids and he had kind of a hillbilly accent. I'd seen pictures of some backwoods cult in Tennessee whose men, to prove their faith in God, draped themselves in poisonous snakes. Had rattlers and cottonmouths coiled around his arms, he couldn't have seemed any more bizarre—but I didn't intend to let him flummox me.

"What's happening up ahead? Do you *know*?" I demanded.

"Take it easy, honey. I was just putting you on. You can see everything from around the corner. I'll help you climb up—you can see for yourself."

I glanced at Joanne, inviting her to join me but she hung back. I handed her my sign and followed the little man. Around the corner, a vividly painted bus loomed out of the crush of stalled marchers. Orange, pink, magenta, purple, yellow, crimson. Phosphorescent green. Electric blue. Its wild swirls of color were sprinkled with dizzily lettered mottos and obscenities. Miscellaneous bumper stickers and a FUCK COMMUNISM poster were plastered to the side of the bus that I could see.

A couple of guys seemed to be stretched out inside on makeshift beds. Other oddly dressed young people were standing around the bus or sitting on its roof. Toward the back of the roof, a blonde girl with long Alice in Wonderland hair and an ankle-length dress of printed Indian cotton held a dirty-faced infant sleeping on her lap. The girl's bare feet dangled over the side. Doll faced and vacant eyed, she stared out over the crowd. I figured that probably she was tripping.

"You can see great from up top," said the little man. "Come on, I'll give you a boost."

I scampered onto the top of the bus. Alice in Wonderland took no notice of me. From my new vantage point I could see an ominous tableau.

Across one margin of the wedge-shaped space, a couple of hundred Oakland police stood ranged in a double line—but they looked scarcely human. Their faces were obscured by massive helmets which glinted under the street lamps and under lights that whirled relentlessly atop their patrol cars nearby. These cops wore bandoliers across their chests. Gas masks hung from them. Gas grenades, riot sticks and guns hung from their belts.

"Isn't it great up here?" the little man exulted. He was dancing back and forth from one cowboy booted foot to the other, snapping his fingers. His braids swayed, flapping against his jacket. Resentfully, I endured him. I was straining to make out the leaders of the march, two hundred feet away.

The VDC's lead sound truck had stopped at the near end of the triangle. Around it, lean male figures congregated in what seemed a council of war. Was my friend Gary among them? I couldn't be sure.

In the center of the triangle lay no man's land. Suddenly its borders gave way. So suddenly that it was hard to tell which edge had caved in first, what possibly could've happened to set off such turmoil. Pandemonium of shouts and curses—screaming and thwacks and a strange metallic rattling. Men were fighting in the street. Bicycle chains swinging in air, glittering and crashing. And policemen's clubs smashing sideways and downwards—though I couldn't make out their targets. As I watched, I flinched.

Instantly, cameramen shouldered their way into the melee. Flashbulbs exploded.

A motley band of Hells Angels—jeans clad, black jacketed—had swarmed from Oakland toward the VDC leaders, had attacked only to be attacked themselves. Now they were being herded into black Marias while someone—who could tell who? Gary?—was carried to an ambulance whose siren came awake, tearing through the night.

"What happened?"

A guy perched high on a lamppost responded. "Those bastard cops from Oakland, they let the Hells Angels through their line." He spat into the gutter, he bared his teeth with fury. "They sicced 'em on us, the fuckin' scum—but the Berkeley cops, they protected the VDC."

The ambulance's siren grew fainter and fainter. I couldn't spot Joanne from the top of the bus. I sat down on its roof and slid down to its hood, then down onto the ground. Now a hurly-burly of people blocked my view of the Oakland line. And my friend Joanne was nowhere to be seen.

Pressing through the crowd, came a VDC marshal. "The line of march has been changed," he kept shouting hoarsely. "Head for the Berkeley civic center."

"We're not going into Oakland?" a bunch of us asked in chorus.

The marshal shook his head. "We'll have a rally downtown."

"Shit!" "Oh, for chrissake!" All around me people were shaking their heads and fuming. One more rally. I slumped with disappointment. Reluctantly I thought about heading home. Then I heard someone calling my name.

"Elise!"

I turned and found Ian Kellaway at my shoulder. He was younger than me, slim and a bit under average height with sandy hair and a gentle manner. I hadn't seen him for almost a year, just before they carted him off to prison, a shining boy. But now he looked ten years older, wan and wasted as a fasting monk.

"Ian, are you okay?" I asked.

He managed a strange smile, his pale eyes pained and probing.

"As okay as I need to be, I guess."

We fell into step together, heading north with the crowd, away from Oakland.

"Did you just get out?" I asked him.

He nodded. "A week ago."

"Pretty rough, eh?"

"It's over. I've got other things to think about."

"How's Beth?" I asked, then bit my tongue. Oh god, I was thinking, what if his wife's dumped him, what if that's why he's alone and looking so awful? But then again Beth was Church of the Brethren; she was soberly responsible, not the least bit flaky, and just as firm a pacifist as he.

"Oh Beth is fine, she's great," he said.

This time when he smiled his eyes lit up. That made me feel a lot better about him.

"She wrote me all the time I was inside, she came to visit. But just right now she's got a little cold, didn't feel like marching."

"Going to the rally?" I asked him.

He shook his head.

"Wanna go somewhere for coffee?"

"No, going home, back home to Beth."

A bus stopped at the corner and Ian ran to climb aboard. As I trekked up Shattuck Avenue, heading for my place, I thought about how I'd met him three and a half years before. And how that chance encounter had changed my life.