

THE *BIG CHILL* FACTOR

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The sixties. We lived in their din and now we live in their shadow. Virtually every aspect of the New Right's program, both social and political, attempts to turn back what happened to us in the sixties. And everything the baby boom generation does now is seen in relation to what it did then, whether transcending the sixties or—the most damning phrase these days—“stuck in the sixties.” In either case the sixties now often seem . . . embarrassing. Extreme in all things, naïve, passionate, sincere, shallow, experimental, rebellious, foolish, committed, fanatic, visionary, long-haired, dope-hazed, multicolored, polymorphous perverse, apocalyptic, uprooted, uprooting, and invoking more spirits than it wanted or had guessed existed or could ever handle. The sixties were a “movement”—and we should take “movement” here to mean literally a *moving*, an enormous moving, where suddenly we were living in the biblical terms of “The last shall be first”; “Seek and ye shall find”; “What good if ye gain the world and lose your soul.” As a “movement,” it was both quintessentially middle-class and furiously proletarian. One thinks of Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, as Griel Marcus described them in *Mystery Train*, “drawing up [the Black Panthers'] statement of aims and demands while playing Dylan's ‘Ballad of a Thin Man’ over and over.”

*You walk into a room and you ask
Is this where it is?
And somebody points to you and says It's his
And you say What's mine
And somebody else says Where what is
And you say Oh my god am I here all alone
And you know somethin's happenin'
But you don't know what it is
Do you
Mister Jones?*

To think of that, and to think of the flower children, believing every manner of esoteric claptrap that could justify whims that had been created by a childhood of commercials preaching instant gratification—and yet they were brave enough (we forget that it took bravery) to put their flowers into the barrels of M-16s that they knew (they weren't *that* naïve) could, as a last resort, be fired against them, offering love where love had never been offered, never been thought of, never been considered a possibility. For a while they seemed to know what love was. A very short while, here and there. A summer in San Francisco, a spring in New York, a concert on somebody's farm where even the redneck police were impressed with their gentleness and genuine goodwill. And then they forgot what love was, or they were overwhelmed by what everyone else already knew: that love was not enough. That love invoked complexities which only maturity could handle. They were not ready to be mature, and why should they have been? They were, above all other things, young, and they were living out their youth as nobody had ever dared.

You tend to forget just how much raw energy was loose in the air then, and you don't quite believe your own memory: that sometimes, then, for weeks on end, we actually thought (1) that we were living in the Promised Land, the New Age, the Other World, (2) that it was everything we had ever imagined it could be, and (3) that everyone was going to join us in its promise as soon as they saw how good it was. There was, hovering over everything, a possibility larger than the tedious make-shift that had been called "daily life." Simply to be alive then, to be part of the demographic bulge called the war babies, meant that *somewhere someone was working out a vision*. Somewhere people more or less your age, people who might conceivably welcome you in their effort, whom you might even run into on the street (which often happened!), were trying to *practice* whatever fool idea, passionate thought, or cosmic vision they thought themselves capable of. You yourself could be doing nothing about such things for the moment, yet through some alchemy of the time somehow you were part of their hope and they were a part of yours.

There were in that era intimations of a freedom so fantastic that every definition, everywhere, felt questioned by it. And didn't Janis Joplin and Mick Jagger, Jim Morrison and James Brown, and Jimi Hendrix enact for us live onstage just what *freedom* could mean when pushed to the limits of its ecstasies and dangers? Wasn't each performance a topographical map in space-time of the lay of the psychic land at the extremes of human possibility? If you'd invented Joplin or James Brown for yourself on acid or in the workshop of sleep, you'd have thought an amazing lesson had been given you on *that* trip.

The Sioux once sent young warriors to the mountains alone, and they were not to come back until they'd dreamed their names. They were protected by the instruction they'd received in how to survive and in how to interpret dreams. We had mostly had instruction in how to be like everyone else, only more successful, and in how dreams were not that important. So when, as an entire generation, we made everywhere we went a mountain on which we were trying to dream our names—we were messy, out of hand, easily distracted, out of our depth, full of shit, half-assed and in deep trouble. But all that sound and all that fury, all that silliness and all those trips imprinted on everyone who was there and on everyone who came after the notion that humankind has far more dimensions that had been admitted for a very long time. It is a simple and utterly disruptive notion. Some people have been trying to live it out and a lot of people have been trying to figure it out ever since. Because once you admit it—once you *really* admit it—nothing is quite the same. And that notion, at that time, was admitted in too many ways by too many people ever to be forgotten entirely.

As it was all coming to an end I wrote a kind of note to myself which I wouldn't read again until a long time later, a fragment of clarity on a cacophonous night: *We know now that our dreams are not going to come true. Are never going to come true. We have learned that our dreams are important not because they come true, but because they take you places you would never have otherwise gone, and teach you what you never knew was there to learn.*

Some comments among several college friends, men and women active in the sixties, who have since become very comfortable:

"I feel I was at my best when I was with you people."

“When I lost touch with this group I lost my idea of what I should be . . . at least we expected something of each other then. I think we needed that.”

“I’d hate to think that was all just—fashion.”

“What?” another asks.

“Our commitment.”

“Sometimes I think I’ve put that time down, pretended it wasn’t real, just so I can live with how I am now. You know what I mean?”

“I think I’ve been too slow to realize that people our own age, with histories just like ours, having gone through all the same stuff, could be dishonest and back-stabbing sleaze-balls.”

The above quotes are from the most sustained, coherent scene in a film called *The Big Chill*, written and directed by one Lawrence Kasdan. It came at a point in Mr. Kasdan’s career when he had a lot to answer for. He had just written a script about white profiteers having a grand time robbing the holy artifacts of ancient peoples (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*); another that cheapened the ideas of mysticism and initiation into a fantasy of easy outs for the good guys (*The Empire Strikes Back*); and he had written one more in the long line of American mystery films that suggests that people capable of sexual intensity must therefore also be capable of cold-blooded murder (*Body Heat*). It’s no wonder that he’s feeling contrite—and *The Big Chill* is, if nothing else, a contrite film.

What is remarkable about it is that two years, now, after its release, successful young professionals who went to college during the sixties still talk about *The Big Chill*. A reference to its title serves as a reference to a conversation they might have had, or had wanted to have but probably didn’t. Which indicates *they* feel contrite. Among other things it indicates that the evasions of the film are widespread evasions, deeply rooted and worth looking at.

The film is an extension of the “Tonight Show” in more ways than one, the least of which is that it was produced by Johnny Carson’s production company. This is fiction as talk show. Seven old friends gather for a weekend to mourn the suicide of an eighth, and they talk. Not the involved, sometimes desperate verbal ventures of friends who need to make crucial judgments about themselves and each other, as Louis Malle captures in *My Dinner with Andre*. *The Big Chill* is talk in the Carson format, pithy sentences (those I quoted are among the longest speeches in the picture) wherein nothing serious can be said without being followed immediately, compulsively by a one-liner. Any exchange of serious dialogue is closed with a deflating joke.

We can’t blame this entirely on the film. It is what passes for “manners” in many circles, standard party style. On the other hand, these people are so trapped by this style that the suicide of a friend doesn’t put a dent in it. The lack of feeling in the film isn’t so remarkable. Many films, and all of Lawrence Kasdan’s, lack genuine feeling. What is remarkable is that people are hungry enough for some resolution to the sixties to endure this film’s lack of feeling, often more than once, *in order to feel spoken to* about this hole in their lives.

The sixties are represented by the dead friend, Alex. A brilliant scientific mind and apparently the instigator and leader of their group during the days of demonstrations, music and drugs, Alex is the only one among them who never chose to go straight. This is interpreted, by the others, finally, as failure. He had all that talent and never *did* anything with it. He kept searching for a self he couldn't find. *Their* failure is in not making him see the error of his ways. Alex is dead. The sixties are dead. Alex is dead because he never realized that the sixties had died. It is never suggested that not being able to "join" this society might have involved a moral stance which Alex was neither able to forego nor, finally, to live with. Because what, in fact, would he have joined? Who are these others who not-so-secretly resent Alex's inability to go their way? Harold, who has made a fortune selling jogging shoes; his wife, Sarah, a doctor, the success of whose practice we can guess at by the huge estate she and her husband live on; Sam, who is the star of a glamorous private-eye TV program; Michael, who was going to "teach black kids in Harlem"—the only mention of blacks—but who instead is a gossip reporter for *People* magazine; Meg, a lawyer who was going to defend the poor but enjoys lucrative real-estate law much more; Karen, who married a very dull businessman—instead of one of her fascinating friends—for the security; and Nick, a Vietnam vet whose wound made him impotent and who deals drugs and doesn't give a shit or tells himself he doesn't. He gets to define the "big chill" of the title, which is nothing less than that this is a cold cruel world: "Well, wise-up folks—we're all alone out there and tomorrow we're going out there again."

It is not that none of them have been true to what were no doubt some pretty naïve ideas of what to do with their lives. It's that none of them found anything, none of them give any evidence of ever considering anything, except naïve idealism on the one hand and a no-holds barred rush for money on the other. You can still consider yourself a righteous person because everyone knows idealism isn't feasible, and what's left? Money.

Here are adults stuck in a convenient either/or system that lets them completely off the hook. Never does anyone express the idea that they have to take responsibility for the world they live in. "Responsibility" is defined as making money. Where would these people be without their one-liners? The humor of the film is not merely to entertain; it is all that makes these barren existences watchable.

Which leaves us with the film, and somebody's need to watch it. We can blame *The Big Chill* on Kasdan and that hydra-headed entity, Hollywood—it certainly doesn't have to reflect on *us*. But the fact is that large numbers of people have felt that it fulfills some need in them. Justifies them, somehow. Expresses them

*And you ask what's mine
And somebody else says Where what is
And you say Oh my god I am here all alone*

And you do. And maybe you are. And there was little in the sixties experience to prepare you for life on those terms except its music (and the music was a lot.) It is a giveaway that *The Big Chill's* soundtrack is mostly some very good but not very threatening soul songs—the Temptations, Aretha Franklin, Marvin Gaye. One Rolling Stones song, which

of course is “You Can’t Always Get What You Want.” Dylan, Morrison, Joplin, Hendrix, James Brown, the Jefferson Airplane, the Buffalo Springfield, Crosby, Stills & Nash, The Band—and, for that matter, almost any other song by the Rolling Stones—are noticeable by their absence. The characters may not have reacted to it but the audience would have had to. These musicians expressed a far more complex vision of existence than *The Big Chill* is willing to concede anyone of the era ever felt. But that still leaves us with an audience that is willfully forgetting, willfully twisting, something that was very important to them once upon a time.

*And you ask what’s mine
And somebody else says Where what is
And you say Oh my god I am here all alone*

It’s not that this is new or even that it’s shocking. Most people in most generations chicken out sooner or later. The film makes its objections to such behavior only in order to rationalize those feelings by its conclusion. The film is intended to *reinforce* the idea that there is no middle ground between idealism and a flaunted materialism. It is intended to make you forget that both stances, idealism and materialism, are childish yearnings for total and instant gratification. They are each the shadow of the other, and neither has anything to do with growing up. To grow up is to be responsible, and responsible does not mean “successful”. It means, at least in part, that one of the things you’re responsible for is your world, and in one way or another you have to find a way to fulfill that responsibility. The world is an ongoing act of creation, and you are part of that act *whether you accept your role or not*. If you deny your creative role, you are creating denial. You are spreading the power of compulsive powerlessness that powers the American machine. And how you fulfill your creative role—“Your mission, should you decide to accept it”—is *your* problem. Nobody can answer that for any of us. D. H. Lawrence once pointed out that the life-giving force can be in anything:

*As we live, we are transmitters of life,
And when we fail to transmit life, life fails to flow through us . . .
It doesn’t mean handing it out to some mean fool, or letting the living dead eat
you up.
It means kindling the life-quality where it was not, even if it’s only in the
whiteness of a washed pocket-handkerchief.*

If there was one such pocket handkerchief in a film like *The Big Chill* . . . but there isn’t. So, an audience—innocent only by its virtue of its refusal to consider the consequences of its life-style—finds in the film a permission to be increasingly lifeless. For these characters are dead to the world. They can make all the jogging shoes, real-estate deals and television series they want, but every day they just become more of a part of the very things they’re accumulating wealth to defend themselves against.

Which is the fate of most Americans—our baby boom generation in particular.

So *The Big Chill* pretends to be an exercise in nostalgia when it is really an exercise in surrender—both for the people who made it and the people who decide they can see themselves in it. This is a terrifying thing to be brought to, but it is terror in the style of the “Tonight Show,” where the next wisecrack and the next commercial always waits, and nothing is so awful as a moment of silence.

The *Big Chill* factor, then, is the erasure of memory, the surrender of identity, and the installment, in their place, of an all-purpose, nonthreatening nostalgia.

In an age when media overpowers the unwary and infiltrates memory, it becomes more important every day to pry your memory from media and to live with your own past instead of the past that is being sold collectively as an artifact.

Memory is never an answer, but memory can sometimes pose the needed questions. There is, for instance, the question of our political tactics and our silliness in the sixties. It is important for the next generation to remember that ours never translated its visions of freedom into an effective politics.

This is not to imply that the politics (either radical or mainstream) were exactly *ineffective*. The radical anti-war, civil-rights, and feminist movements educated Americans about America—it was the most important period of self-examination that the country as a whole had undergone since the movement to abolish slavery. We will be a long time living with, reacting to, and implementing that education. Nor could the mainstream liberal politics of the day, the big-spending programs now in such disrepute, be called ineffective. At the time, most of the country believed Lyndon Johnson was right, and that if we only poured enough money into our national wounds—poverty, racism, injustice—those wounds would heal. The money flowed and instead of a salve on our wounds, it was salt. All that the great expenditures of the Great Society did was to show us where and how much we hurt. Johnson’s programs didn’t work nearly as well as we all naively hoped they would, so the effort has been considered a failure, but this is our infantilism that expects something to go away just because we pay for it to go away, thinking that money could be a substitute for the changes we need to make in ourselves. We haven’t considered it a victory that the Great Society’s awkward and often failed programs caused us to begin to live, instead of to hide, our pain. Or that American life began to be lived at a depth it had never before attempted to cope with.

That’s not what we were paying for. Yet to bring the national agonies into our national consciousness—which those programs very successfully did—was the crucial first step in a healing that must inevitably take quite some time.

Still, that’s a long way from what we generally mean by “politics.” As an exercise in memory, as opposed to nostalgia, let’s think of the election of 1968. Nixon is remembered for his landslide victory in 1972, for Cambodia, Vietnam, China, and Watergate—but not for how closely he squeaked by in the election of 1968. We can see how devastating were the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy earlier that spring. They were the national figures who could have mobilized “the sixties sensibility” into votes. Nixon, who almost lost to Hubert Humphrey, could not have stood against Kennedy. And we can see how shallow were the tactics of the young radical leaders who gave Nixon the election by refusing to participate and urging that the rest of us not participate either, in the hope that breaking the Democratic party would leave room for the creation of a new, more radical party. But everybody was young, and all-or-nothing was far more appealing, emotionally, than gradual change. As a generation we

were, and we remain, as hooked on instant gratification as the television sensibility we despised.

It is hard to fault any human being, of course, for neglecting to vote for Hubert Humphrey. That was a race between a pig and a rat. One left the voting booth—having finally, after endless discussions, voted for Humphrey—feeling that the act had been *physically* ugly, the psychic equivalent of dipping one's hand into a vat of warm mucus. It came out dripping of collective ills.

Humphrey was a pig, looked and squeaked like one. Not the pejorative “pig” as we used it then, meaning cops and capitalists (cops whom we called too, when in trouble, and capitalists whom we would yet become). No, Humphrey was a porcine soul whose impressive legislative record was the work of an able and sentimental bureaucrat who was nonetheless a weak and not very moral man. There was the Senator Humphrey of the helpful liberal legislation, and there was the Vice President Humphrey who praised Vietnam as “a great adventure” and all but kissed Lyndon Johnson's rump. And there was the Humphrey who, in 1950, had proposed a bill that set up detention centers for American radicals. The bill passed, the camps were built, the only peacetime American concentration camps (in the original, pre-Nazi use of the term) since the first Indian “reservations.” Humphrey's camps weren't used, finally, but they were nonetheless his camps.

Still, some of us voted for him. Our thought was this: American voters did not have the right to be fastidious. The stakes were too high, and we would not be the ones to pay the price. At the time we were dropping napalm on Vietnamese civilians—our government was using our money to make the stuff, we were making it in our factories, it was being dropped by our friends and neighbors. Humphrey was far more likely to end those murders than Nixon, if only because he was more susceptible to public influence. It was disgusting to vote for him, but did we have the right to compare our disgust to how it felt for napalm to boil a child's skin? To bear our disgust might have been the least we could do.

For many of us who once were and may still be radicals, our sense of decency had been curdled by events into nausea, and this nausea had rendered us politically impotent. While “the worst” as Yeats had it, “are filled with passionate intensity,” and still are. To proceed in the face on one's own nausea is a kind of courage no one ever told us about, but it is the courage we needed and still need.

God knows we had every right to vomit. At that riot of a convention in Chicago, Humphrey kissed the television when he won the nomination. The man *kissed a television screen*. It is almost a virtue that he did it shamelessly, knowing that he was being photographed by another television camera. While outside his hotel the police were beating the hell out of everybody who didn't have a uniform on.

Beware of your own innocence. Innocence offended too often results in paralysis. “The children of the sixties” were shocked at the behavior both of the police and of presidential candidates. I confess, here is where I began to part company with them, for I was less a child of the sixties than a child of the streets. And it must be admitted that in the Bronx, in Bedford-Stuyvesant, in East Harlem and Harlem and the East Village, we who had been children on welfare in the sixties watched the Chicago riots with a mix of furies, sometimes as angry at the demonstrators as we were at the cops and the Democrats. We were the hunger, we were the violence, we were the illiteracy, we were

the crime. So, watching that convention, it must be admitted that some of our anger was laced with satisfaction, for “the Chicago treatment” was part of our daily bread. It came down on us for the way we looked and the way we talked, the way we walked. It was impossible to find a family among us whose young men had escaped it. Not long afterward, my mother’s kitchen would be filled with cops clubbing my brother into unconsciousness while she screamed. So it was with some satisfaction that we watched the well-off kids learn the hard way, which for us had been and would continue to be the only way. And it was with contempt that we viewed their shock and their tears. They had been trying to tell *us* about America, and yet they had been so protected from America, that they now had the luxury of shock. Their mother’s kitchens were safe, we thought. (As it happened, we were wrong. Their kitchens were almost as full of ambushes as ours, different in style, but almost as damaging—they had been sheltered too much, so as they grew older their need for comfort would trivialize most of their best impulses, leaving them empty and without dignity. But we had no way of knowing that then.)

Yet we had marched beside these college kids, and would again, for even in our bitterness we knew that they were making leaps of awareness that few individuals, much less whole generations, ever made, and they were doing it with real courage and purpose. Was their “Don’t trust anyone over thirty” a premonition of how comfortable they’d become over thirty themselves, how much fire they’d lose? How little there would be to fear from them after they got what their parents had wanted for them all along—security, success, a stake in white America. And would we have been a little less condescending to them, a little less macho toward them, had we been able to see, for instance, that Eldridge Cleaver would attend the 1984 Republican convention as a Reagan delegate—that Neil Young and Jerry Rubin and so many others would join the Reagan camp. We saw their traps so clearly, and our own so badly, which is to say we were very much alike, middle and lower classes, doomed alike to using our insight into others as a shield against seeing into ourselves

Fast-forward through the summer, to within weeks of the election, October 2, 1968, Mexico City. “Student unrest,” as the media calls it, had been going on there as it had all over the world that year. But Mexico was especially uptight because for the first time it was being treated internationally as a grownup—it was being allowed to stage the Olympic games. This heightened the Mexican government’s self-consciousness about its students, who were demure when compared to those in other parts of the world. In the words of Octavio Paz, “the Mexican students did not propose violent and revolutionary social changes, nor was their program as radical as many groups of German and North American youth. It also lacked the orgiastic and near-religious tone of ‘the hippies.’ The movement was democratic and reformist, even though some of its leaders were of the extreme Left.”

On that day in October, thousands of Mexican students gathered at the Plaza of Tlatelolco for a meeting, (not a demonstration). At the end of the meeting, when they were about to leave, the plaza was surrounded by the army and the soldiers opened fire. It was a massacre. The English newspaper, *The Guardian*, is thought to have the most reliable figure on the number of dead: 325. Thousands were wounded. Thousands were arrested, many of whom remained in prison, without trial, for many years.

If our political consciousness in North America had *been* a political consciousness, instead of an incoherent and emotional rebellion that never stopped long enough to think very hard, the Mexican massacre would have sent us into the streets by the millions, realizing that the ugliness and stupidity of our government was still the ugliness and stupidity of a functioning democratic society—at least democratic in comparison to any other. Because the Right perceived this, and we did not, the Right firmed its power then and has fundamentally kept it ever since.

But the Mexican massacre barely dented North American consciousness then and is largely forgotten now. If we had felt solidarity with those students, if we had, by the thousands, called upon our government to demand an accounting by the Mexican government; if we had even simply pulled out of the Olympic Games in symbolic revulsion—but how could a nation that was napalming civilians pretend to be horrified by anything?

Yet, if we had done virtually anything, North American eyes might have begun to open to Latin American realities, fifteen years before the choices we now all face with Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico. Open eyes change history. The very fact of awareness changes history. Who knows what would have happened if that moment had been seized?

I make these notes for the future, not in regret at the past. As that era is every day rewritten by a nation embarrassed and frightened by its intensity, as its immense cultural advances are taken for granted and as “the children of the sixties” are blamed for the crimes of its old men, it is instructive to understand what our actual mistakes were.

Fast-forward again, past Nixon’s tiny election margin, a man allowed to win by people who couldn’t bear the nausea of voting for Humphrey; past Nixon’s massive escalation of the bombing of Vietnamese and now Cambodian villages *even though his own CIA continually reported that the bombing was having no military effect, and in fact was having, in the CIA’s view, a negative effect, strengthening Vietnamese resistance*. Why did he continue to murder? For if it was not military, then it must be called murder. Because the U.S. was not winning on the ground, and he wanted the *image* of winning, and that image was the B-52 cascading firestorms on civilian villages. He seemed to believe that the Vietnamese and Cambodians would react to the image as much as to the destruction. Watergate was what Nixon went down for, but this mass murder was Nixon’s real crime, as it had been Johnson’s: murder as a form of public relations.

What Nixon had most in common with the people who demonstrated against him was that they understood, and they were avid about, each other’s public relations. We reacted on the same level on which he bombed, both sides caught in the mood of the time. The secret bombings of Cambodia, kept secret even from congress, illegal and certainly an impeachable offense, became public in the spring of 1970. Students led the protests. In Kent, Ohio, several frightened National Guardsmen fired rifles at unarmed students, and four white kids died. Within days, more demonstrators—blacks—were killed in a similar and apparently not-so accidental incident in the South, but there was nobody to take an amazing photograph, and the event was swallowed up, even at that time. Many black activists had been killed in police raids in many places at roughly that time and white college students seemed to take this for granted.

The demonstration in Washington against Nixon's Cambodian murders was impassioned even more by the Kent State deaths. Were they going to start shooting at us with impunity now? Nobody knew. Anything seemed possible. My friends and I played the Jefferson Airplane's *Volunteers* album over and over again and piled into a car and went to Washington. We didn't have any weapons, but we had crowbars and such tools placed strategically around the car. We didn't intend to be taken quietly if we were to be taken at all, and we didn't intend to let the police beat on us as they had the kids in Chicago. The Mexican student movement had folded after the massacre; after the Kent State skirmish, it seemed essential to show the government that they were going to have to shoot at more of us before we'd back off. We didn't know we were going to one of the last great demonstrations and that in fact the Kent State shootings were going to be enough to signal the end of *that* era.

There was one moment in that demonstration that still stands out, for me, from all the moments in all those years of demonstrations. Thousands of us walked in a mob up a street adjacent to the White House, with "One-two-three-four we don't want your fucking war" pulsating out of us like amplified heartbeats, when near the head of the procession, if it could be said to have a head, a skinny, pretty blonde girl got up on some tall guy's shoulders. You could see her up and down the street. How she started leading the chants, I can't remember. It happened by virtue of the fact that she was the only one that everybody could *see*. It certainly wasn't premeditated, but it got so *she'd* shout a chant and the rest would follow, thousands perhaps, hundreds certainly. "Hey, hey, USA, how many kids did you kill today?" and she'd yell the next chant and we'd yell it louder.

Could it have lasted for even five minutes? I don't know. It was the sort of intensity wherein you lose your sense of time. The mob suddenly had, if not a leader, at least a figurehead. And a female figure—*very* rare in those days. Like our own Chantal, the singer who inspired the revolution in Genet's *The Balcony*. A yearning ran like a thrill through the street, a moment of real mob-like ecstasy unlike the orderly, heavy sense of companionship and momentum usual in the huge demonstration, and as we chanted and followed that blonde, nearing a White House barricaded with troops (we would learn later that Nixon wasn't even home), someone near me yelled, "This could be *it* muthafucka if she says *Go* I say *Go* we *GO!*" And, for a giddy, hovering moment, it looked as if that could happen. It occurs to me now that it would have been a futile gesture, whether or not Nixon had been there. No doubt many of us would have been shot. And the White House propaganda machine would have turned the gesture against us. But I didn't care much about those things right then. The White House was still pretty far away and we never would have made it, but the raw release of the act was almost unbearably attractive. For that moment that girl—and she was no more than a girl—may have been the only person with real power in the whole movement, though I can't say for sure that people in the same march but a block or two away were even aware of her. Those demonstrations were like that.

The moment passed. I had gotten close to her and I saw her face as she slid off the tall guy's shoulders. She was very, very frightened. She had felt our anger focused through her, flowing through her, and she couldn't bear it. Who could have? I said something to her but she looked right through me, and there was no mistaking the expression on her face, she hated me, she hated all of us, hated us for the fear she was feeling. And that march went the way of all marches while she lost herself in the crowd.

And thinking of her now I think of that Bob Seger song: “Come back baby—rock ‘n’ roll never forgets.” But I don’t expect her to come back. We had exhausted the *image* of the demonstration. It was never really enough, and we treated it as though it was more than enough. And fifteen years later it is still an image too worn to shock or motivate. The Right perceived then that there was no substitute for grass-roots organizing and steady, plodding work. They had always been good at plodding, so only seven years after Watergate their most rabid representative took power. It is all the more amazing, in the light of the Right’s massive power, what far-reaching changes the radicals and visionaries of the sixties instituted with no more than the power to make noise.

The most joyful noise we made—and it may yet go down as the most joyful noise *ever* made in North America—was at Woodstock, where, thank the gods, someone (Michael Wadleigh, bless him) had a camera crew and would do the job of seeing that the weekend didn’t pass entirely into legend. Otherwise, by now, the reality that the film preserves would have been pooh-poohed as exaggeration. In that last summer of the sixties, several summers past the first and short-lived “summer of love” (it didn’t last quite a summer), everything that had been valuable, everything that had been wonderful, everything that had been visionary, the quintessential joy of that collective impulse that we all felt with such private heat would gather on a hillside for a few days as though to transmit its remembrance into the future. For future generations, “the sixties” would be distilled into that long weekend that was further compressed into two hours of film. Everything that went into the making of something like *The Big Chill* might be able to rationalize and sanitize the sixties, but while *Woodstock* exists nobody can take it all away.

But to be there wasn’t at all like watching this film or any film. Who were we, on that hillside? A lot of more than slightly delirious children, of various ages—I was a few months short of twenty-four, and I was older than most. I remember the shock of walking toward the lake and seeing three naked men walking casually down the road, unremarked by the crowd. And, at the lake, simply to sit and stare at the loveliness, the gentleness of a lot of naked strangers looking truly innocent in that water. Yes, we’d gotten ourselves back to the Garden. The Army helicopters, bringing food and medical supplies, would buzz the lake and everybody would wave—everything was all right that day, even the Army. We seemed to sense that they were kids just like us. My friend took off his clothes and went in. I was too shy. I couldn’t quite believe my eyes. I had the feeling that nobody could. Not at the lake, not while watching the music, and certainly not the musicians, who for us plebians were rather far off, sheltered people. For *once* in American pop culture the show was not on stage. What characterized the sixties often, and this weekend in particular, was that the show was in the audience. These were *our* songs. They were just singing them. And they knew it. And they were proud of it. And we were too. And nobody could quite believe it really felt this way that day: oh my God I’m *not* here all alone.

This was the world we wanted. It had happened by mistake, because too many people came to a concert, ten times more people than there were facilities for. And the leaders of the concert, who were no older than the rest of us, decided that instead of trying to control the situation—which was not possible, but could have been tried, with God knows what awful result—they would lose their million dollars and just try to take care of this migration of souls that had alighted in front of their stage. Nobody could have planned such a weekend—and every time someone’s tried to plan “a Woodstock” since

it's been hollow, or, at worst, it's been Altamont (put on by some of the same promoters). We all seemed to have come through a gap in our shared notions of the possible. Here was the dream come true. Here was the Promised Land, the New Age, the Other World. Nobody knew what to *do* with it, and it couldn't have gone on for another day, but here it had materialized, and there were many giddy expressions, as though to ask, Am I dreaming?

The answer, of course, was yes. We were dreaming. Together, in the same place, we were living the dreamed we'd dreamed. And what does one *do* with a dream but remember it? You may or may not interpret it, but interpretations fade and you remember the images, the feeling—some dreams stick with us for decades that way. You may not be able to live them, but to deny them would be to deny yourself. You keep their possibility within you, and try not to stray too far in your heart from the moment when dream reached toward reality and reality reached back to dream and taught you that the world is immense, truly, and the way we're doing things in this world is only one of the many ways we might be doing them. Once you know this, then you know that we're not just alive, we're the bearers of life. *Anything* can change.

Woodstock was all this, certainly. And it was just as certainly the beginning of the end. You can't film or record a smell, but the stench there was a part of its meaning as well. The overpowering odor of the garbage in the heat in the front of the stage. The songs and film tell you nothing of people sitting in, even sleeping in, the mud from the overflowing latrines, a mud rich in shit and piss. We were *that* powerless. Even in our dream. A decade was ending. It had taken all our energy to get to that hillside, and once there we had just had enough left to say, "Wow." Softly, in utter bewilderment that we'd made it, and listen to Grace Slick, as the sun came up—"You are the crown of Creation." She sang, as we took a morning piss in our own mud. My friend and I trudged through the mud for home, utterly exhausted, exhilarated and depressed at once, long before the next dawn when Jimi Hendrix would play his electric version of "The Star-Spangled Banner." That was the summer that we first put men on the moon, but soon the concert at Woodstock would seem a lot farther away than the moon ever had.

1980. L.A. There was a documentary playing called *The War at Home*. An intimate look at the movement to stop the war in Vietnam. I was smart enough to go alone but not intuitive enough to go when no one else I knew would be there. It was painful to watch that screen and see how young we were, how hard we tried, and how narrowly we thought. How so much enthusiasm and so little knowledge combined mainly to make a lot of noise. Useful noise, to be sure. Honorable noise, certainly. It is possible that, as a result, never again will the United States be able to embark upon such a questionable war without a serious cross-examination. An amazing effect, really, when you see in the film what you couldn't see at the time, being part of it all: which is, that these were *children*. There are such high-handed critiques now about what they did and did not do, these children. Memory is devious, even when it doesn't dissolve into nostalgia, and one forgets one's own freshly minted, wide-open nineteen-year-old face, and the faces of one's friends—the faces of those demonstrators. These children believed so hard and did what they could and nothing was ever the same afterwards, and that is quite a record for a lot of children led largely by children. How amazed they were, in their innocence, that simply pointing up to their elders that this war was an atrocity was not enough. How silly and spoiled and brave. How very much *for real* they were.

After the film the lobby was thick with friends and acquaintances who didn't look like that anymore, and who weren't nearly so silly or for real, and many of them were inviting each other to a party at a well-known producer's place—a "reception" for the film, just like we'd all gotten married or something, and it was obvious that the conversation would be informed and intelligent, the faces cheery, the wine decent, there would be good food and the music wouldn't be too intrusive. It was three years before *The Big Chill*, but the film was very much alive in these faces.

Well, I got as far as the door of that polite party, and then was very rude to some good people whom I'd had no call to be rude to, and sulked, positively sulked, off into the night, yelling something over my shoulder that I hope nobody heard. But we had just seen it all over again, the napalm and the villagers it burned and the children who protested it and Nixon and Johnson and the cops and all of us together in the street, and it seemed to me then and it seems to me now that to have enthusiasm for such a party after seeing such things was to have enthusiasm of one's own resignation, for the distance one has achieved from the heart of what was once a great collective emotion. If that is what is meant by "maturity," you can keep it.

I'm looking for a maturity more alive, a maturity that's not afraid to be desperate, a maturity that isn't terrified of looking ridiculous. A maturity that's still willing to get dangerous if that's what it takes. I would like to have a noble object for this, but I don't. I'm not looking for peace of mind and, admittedly, wouldn't know what to do with it if I found any. It is just that, as Miguel de Unamuno put it, "we die of cold and not of darkness."

Fortunately it was only a few blocks from that reception to a little bar that doesn't exist any more called the Taurus Tavern, which was too little, mixed black and white too thoroughly, and could get too rough for any of the music critics of any of the L.A. papers to frequent, and where, on this Friday, like all those Fridays, A Band Called Sam would play rhythm and blues too loud for anyone to talk about what they did or didn't do in the sixties, what happened or failed to happen in the seventies, and what the eighties, the vortex of the eighties, were up to. Sam Taylor was in his forties, had played with Otis Redding and had been the vocal coach for Sam and Dave, and he knew what he was doing. Juke Logan, his harp-man, was wailing behind as he yelled Wilson Pickett's old "ninety-nine and a half won't do—got to have a hundred!"

The people crowded onto that very small dance floor—seventy people could crowd the entire club, and there were more than that this night—sweating, dancing together and alone, faces masked by poses and faces naked, dancing slick or dancing awkward, and it could have been a wedding or a wake, the first night of all or the last, and this would be a good place to be. It can be a beautiful thing to dance all night in an evil time.

I wasn't the only one who couldn't take that party. Faces started showing up at the Taurus who'd been at the movie and then the party, and then couldn't go home. And Sam was singing, "An' I won't stop tryin' till I cre-ate dis-tur-bance, in your mind," and the dancers gathered around this music like shivering people around a fire.

As the band took a break one woman who'd seen the movie said, "I was *in* it. I was the black-and-white historical footage." Which is probably why some of us had gravitated to that sweaty juke joint. We did not like the idea of being reduced to black-and-white historical footage. Nor would some of us ever swallow the nostalgic evasions of *The Big Chill*. We knew where we'd been and why we'd been there. We didn't know where we were going—but who does? "Come and get your spirit/come and get your spirit come and get your spirit," Sam Taylor sang (his own tune) again and again into the dark that night, and we, as Buddy Holly once put it, raved on.

1985. Sometimes when Brendan, age eleven, is supposed to have gone to sleep, I pass by his slightly ajar door and hear his soft, out-of-tune singing in the dark. He has the earphones on and isn't aware of how loudly he's singing along. The first records he got himself after we gave him the stereo were the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and Jim Morrison. He listens to the oldies station a lot, especially late at night. He also has the names "Frankie Goes to Hollywood" and "David Bowie," among others, written boldly on the looseleaf binder he carries to school, and he watches his share of MTV. But when I hear his soft and off-key versions of "You Can't Always Get What You What," "Here Comes the Sun," and "Subterranean Homesick Blues"; when I know that for him and for others like him these tunes are still very much alive after going on twenty years; when I know that for him they blend with the new music that I don't know very well, as he synthesizes all these meanings every day into something he can grow up with and grow into; then I don't think so much about the people of my generation who gave up trying to live out their best thoughts—I think of those who haven't, and won't, and I think of those who are coming up from the fires we've left them, both the inner fires and the fires they'll have to walk through. And whenever Brendan fights me about some damn thing, so fierce about whether or not a chore or a bedtime is fair, testing his ability to take us on, win or lose I'm always so very thankful for his fierceness. May it last, I pray. May he not be one of those who forgets.

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