

The Girl Who Would Stop Time

Steve Slavin

2016

One, two, three, four, we don't want your fuckin' war!

Again and again they chanted the couplet as they slowly made their way downtown along New York City's Fifth Avenue, and then crosstown on 42nd Street to the United Nations. There, they would hear Martin Luther King and several other luminaries express these same sentiments against the Vietnam war, albeit in somewhat milder language.

Donna and her cohort of anarchists had settled in at the ass end of the parade behind the Unaffiliated banner, which best described their feelings about the quasi-military organization of the parade.

It was kind of weird to hear all the onlookers cheering wildly for their group. Walking next to Gary, Donna remarked, "I mean, I can understand their cheering medical workers for peace, or students for peace, but Unaffiliated? What does that mean?"

"Unaffiliated means unaffiliated. Affiliated anarchists would be oxymoronic."

"Gary, can you believe the parade organizers call those schmucks with armbands parade marshals?"

"What should they be called?"

"Why not just put swastikas on their arm bands and call them the Hitler Youth?"

"Perfect." What do we want?

Peace!

And when do we want it?

Now!

This was, by far, the largest anti-war march in history. Donna, Garry, and their anarchist buddies could not help but be impressed by this vast sea of humanity surging against the American war machine.

A group of puppeteers marching among the unaffiliated carried huge papier-maché masks of President Lyndon Baines Johnson, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Each wore a placard that read, "War Criminal."

Hey, hey, LBJ

How many kids did you kill today?

As the parade marshals shouted cadence, everyone among the unaffiliated picked up on the words, but refused to march in step. What was this supposed to be—a fuckin' military parade?

A couple of months earlier, Donna had joined the Yippies, a group started by Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, and a few other Lower Eastside radicals at Hoffman's apartment on New Year's Eve, 1967. Also known, in a not entirely derogatory way, as the "Groucho Marxists" because of their humorous protests, the Yippies had decided upon an uncharacteristically practical action plan.

They were going to shut down the nation's war machine by stopping time. If they could stop all the nation's clocks from working, then our military—industrial complex would be unable to function and the U.S. would have to end its war against the Vietnamese people. And, this action would begin by holding a giant Yip-In at one of New York City's most famous landmarks.

On the evening of March 22, 1968, some five or six thousand Yippies, sympathizers, and curiosity seekers descended upon Grand Central Terminal in mid-town Manhattan. There was a circular information booth about 60 feet in diameter in the middle of the central concourse of the terminal with a clock above it.

Donna and another young woman were boosted onto the roof of the booth. Meanwhile, hundreds of policemen surrounded the group, awaiting orders to begin making arrests.

Once on the roof, Donna realized that she had lost a sneaker, but knew what she had to do. She and the other woman pulled the hands off the clock.

Cheers from the crowd echoed throughout the terminal as they held up the clock hands for all to see. Some of the Yippies began throwing firecrackers and the police quickly moved in to make arrests. The cops indiscriminately beat Yippies and innocent onlookers alike with their nightsticks. Scores of people were injured, dozens were hospitalized, and there were more than one hundred arrests in what was described in the press as a “police riot.”

Despite being arrested and spending the night in jail, Donna was ecstatic. It wasn’t so much because of her 15 minutes of fame, but that she and the other young woman had actually done what they had set out to do. If their goal had been to stop time, then at least they had taken the first step.

But the rest of the nation’s clocks were never stopped. The war would drag on for six more years, and hundreds of thousands of people would die. So in retrospect, what had all their marches, demonstrations, and be-ins really accomplished? Still, while the protesters may not have ended the war, they sure gave it a try. When their children and grandchildren asked what did you do to end the war, at least they would have an answer.

Today is May 16, 1978. It is a day that marks an end, if not a new beginning. When Donna got up that morning, she smiled as she recalled the slogan that she and all her friends would often proclaim, “Never trust anyone over 30.”

Well, guess what today is. Yup—that’s right!

She glanced in the mirror. Thankfully, no gray hairs, and no perceptible wrinkles. But numbers don’t lie, and 30 will always equal 30. There’s just no stopping time.

That evening, a bunch of friends took her to the Russian Tea Room, just down the block from Carnegie Hall. An ornate five-story restaurant designed to recall pre-revolutionary Russia, it seemed an ironic choice for an anarchistic birthday celebration. But after a few vodkas, even Donna no longer noticed.

An elaborately uniformed waiter approached their table. Looking like a member of the czar’s palace guard, he carried a large birthday cake which he ceremoniously placed in front of Donna. Almost everyone in the dining room joined in singing Happy Birthday. After blowing out the candles, she closed her eyes and made her secret wish. She thought back to the clock in Grand Central and remembered how she had felt that evening. Her wish was very simple: If only I could go back just one more time.

Her friends all raised their glasses and shouted, “May your wish be granted!” Then, it was bottoms up! If any were tempted to fling their glasses against the wall, they managed to restrain themselves.

Just then, a man about Donna’s age approached the table. He looked vaguely familiar, and he was grinning widely.

“Do I know you?” she asked.

“I doubt it. I mean, we never really met.”

“So how do you know me?”

“Aren’t you the girl who pulled the hands off the clock?” She smiled and threw her arms around him. They hugged like old friends.

Then he said, “I have something that belongs to you.” And, he handed her a sneaker.

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https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/395-winter-2016-50th-anniversary/the-girl-who-would-stop-time
Fifth Estate #395, Winter 2016 — 50th Anniversary

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