

Rebellion in Nowhere

Hank Malone

1969

I

Rioting by 250 Black youths, says a UPI dispatch dated March 23, 1969, brought 200 police from 10 communities to the 20,000-student campus at Northern Illinois University at DeKalb.

Windows were smashed in the campus police station, library, university center, and a women's dormitory. Two trucks and two cars were vandalized. Damage was estimated at several thousand dollars. There were no arrests.

II

DeKalb, Illinois is in the middle of Nowhere, about 60 miles north of cornfields west of Chicago. In the early spring the area surrounding DeKalb is a mush of gray drizzle and desolation, like the texture of an Ingmar Bergman film. Early-Spring in the midwest has a haiku-like simplicity, a singular negligible gloom.

Americans live in this region on a diet of small-town stupors, dreamless to the point of schizophrenia, unaffected by the patter of slick magazines telling them "how America lives." Local residents know how Americans live: hand-in-hand with God, John Barleycorn, and Richard Nixon.

Every few miles or so, buried in the core of this gray desolation, the traveler notices those hideous automobile graveyards of rural America filled with the corpses of last year's dreams rusting in Hell, piled on top of each other like the aftermath of a cosmic collision. These automobiles could be, as easily, the corpses of Black people.

With nearby pigs trotting through the wintry cornfields, DeKalb seems like an ominous world of spectral stillness.

III

The town of DeKalb barely flounders up through the cornfields, barely exists. Like something on the frontier of Nowhere, DeKalb is nearly a trading post settlement; numberless, full of sky, toothless, neither winning nor losing in the battle with death.

The Western Auto Supply is at the heart of town. The Fargo theatre has been converted into an ice-rink. The J.C. Penney store sleeps in the town like a huge ancient hound. There is whiteness under whiteness under whiteness.

When a man dies in DeKalb, letters and advertisements still come for him. And there are no "colored" or "niggers," except down at...N.I.U.

IV

N.I.U. Like the call-letters of a radio station, N.I.U. broadcasts the stiff mummy-cloth of Kulchur to the tiny settlement of DeKalb, the croaking of 20,000 students hollering NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY! all the way from the west end of town, across the railroad tracks, to the eastern cornfields and the Del Monte canning plant.

It is true that 10,000 of these students are commuters, living elsewhere in Nowhere, coming in from surrounding towns and cities, driving in for the week, out on the weekends in new cars or back home to Plastic9-5america.

There is hardly an intriguing face on campus. The student-faces are astonishingly devoid of mystery, curiosity, intrigue, or freedom. These are the blond regular faces of the American Nowhere. With minds and hearts like paperweights, they open their world with can-openers and church-keys to drink a bevy of university instructors in the mornings and afternoons of colorless seepage.

Life at N.I.U. seems like a massive body moving in the local fog toward America and Success. Unlike the town which contains it, N.I.U. seems curiously wealthy, a campus swelling in State of Illinois dividends.

At its center, surrounded by dormitories that look like psychiatric clinics, is a gigantic new monolith known as the University Center, a 15-story slab of brick and glass jutting into the skies of Nowhere. This is the Mid-western Masterpiece, an unbelievable block of professional mush looking like a Hilton Hotel!

The analogy is right, a Hilton Hotel. This is the part of America where young people are born and reared to fill vacancies in Hilton Hotels.

This is the part of America where everything is part of a plastic dream of the future, where there are few industries (with one major exception) to get in the way of the Nowhere-dreams of glass-lined offices full of well-paid, cheerful, professional paper-shufflers.

Inside the University Student Center there is a front desk, and a restaurant off to the side known as "The Pheasant Room."

Everyone seems to major in one subject at N.I.U.: the Bachelor of Arts degree in Hilton Hotelsmanship. No doubt there are courses offered in carpet-walking, facial blandmanship, and consumersmanship; every conceivable course to mass-produce the corporate-executive-consumer; the blond-haired, blue-eyed Zombie.

V

On the day of The Rebellion in Nowhere, on the front steps of the University center, three neatly-shabby "radicals" (Howdy-Doody revolutionaries) sold issues of the local underground newspaper, NEWS FROM NOWHERE.

Elsewhere on campus, young fully-clothed girls posed up against works of campus sculpture for their photographic boyfriends clicking away like mad, dreaming of Hugh Hefner.

It was too early in the season to start complaining about the local Del Monte vegetable packing plant which annually (in the summer & fall) pollutes the air with the nauseating super-sweet smell of cornhusks fermenting on the other side of town in enormous mounds. It was a nice day in early spring, full of the poisonous Blah that eventually destroys (and creates) the mid-western American.

VI

That night, quite suddenly, there was a full-scale campus rebellion staged by over 250 Black youths. Huge thousand pound concrete slabs were unseated from the stairways of the University Center, and overturned onto the grass. Spotlights and windows were smashed. The Hilton Hotel in Nowhere was scarred and agonized. People were injured. There was blood on the street. Black youths had brought blood and life to Nowhere.

An official statement issued later to the press by an unidentified Black student read as follows:

"On the night of March 22, 1969, the Black students of N.I.U. responded en masse to the beating by approximately five whites acting in the presence of the University Security Police of one Black male student.

“Through this mass response to the racist aggression of whites, the Black student body wishes to serve notice to the racist police department and other administrative elements of Northern Illinois University that it will not tolerate or let go unnoticed any acts of violence committed on Black people.

“The Black students would also like to emphasize that the incident of Friday, March 21, 1969 is only one of the latest of the innumerable acts of racism which they have been the recipients of within the university community.”

VII

The next morning it seemed as if nothing had happened. Sunday morning, and business as usual. A cloud of denial descended on N.I.U., a denial that anything human and Black could actually change the great Hilton Hotel in Nowhere.

250 Black youths, some of them members of the campus organization known as ASCO (Afro-American Cultural Organization) had cut a gaping messy wound on the surface of the white flesh, and nearly everyone in Nowhere tried to behave as if it hadn't happened, everyone except the Black students.

Inside the University Center “hotel,” the desk manager was calmly answering the constantly-ringing telephone in a soft-spoken voice: “Oh yes, we had a little trouble last night...but it's all over now.”

Young couples stopped on the street on their way to the campus “time trials” for student sports cars expressed the anxious calm of the Great Midwestern Void with remarks like: “Yes...the colored got out of hand last night...it happens every once in awhile...but the police took care of everything.” The Fact is, the police took care of nothing! They were psychologically immobilized by the threat of such vitality in Nowhere.

VIII

Whatever comes next, the Black students at N.I.U. have graphically served notice to Mr. & Mrs. Nowhere; on Hilton-America, on Corn-Husker's America, and on Suburbia. The corruption of American racism is being overturned by Black people...even in Nowhere, where white Americans in the cornfields still feel safe to exert their racist violence.

If the actions taken by the Black students at N.I.U. are any indication of a trend, then we might now expect a new kind of confrontation of American racist violence, a confrontation taken to the deepest and most intimate and secluded levels of American society—into the cornfields, into the Hilton Hotels, into the motelrooms and bedrooms of white America in racist Nowhere.

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