

THE POWERLINE

A Personal History of Two Weeks in January

by Alan Casline

Somewhere in my mind was the thought - I may have to get arrested - I write these words a little differently then I used to because I've already had the experience of having my own words read back to me by someone's bought lawyer before a judge who seemed to have the hardest time just not falling asleep. Out of context and not even in rhythm, "We can win an important victory" and "We need more people who are willing to stand." Did you not write these words? And did you not mean the Power Authority's 765 kilovolt line? I'm holding a xerox copy of my short call for help that appeared in a local newspaper. The courtroom is hot and filled with friends and I am growing tired of proof in the form of lies and photographs - a crime - a crime they say! The faces of concerned people look up at me and all of us are somehow in this together -

The letter is about a meeting in Hogansburg on Mohawk land, where an Indian brave spoke about protecting the life of a living elm. He said his people had been protecting a living tree for many hundreds of years - a tree, called the tree of peace - His words come off the paper and leap back at me and my eyes fill with fire -

"No, I meant human freedom and the rights of an individual in the American democracy.

I speak into this lawyer's lame question. Does he really have no understanding of life? It makes sense on some level that I would be here in this court fighting for freedom and civil liberty, putting my own life energy into a struggle that is as old as the first weapon - Does power rest in inanimate objects, in trappings, in words, or does power rest in the human spirit?

It makes sense on some level as the judge finds everyone guilty and I walk out of the courtroom alone. "This reassures my faith in what I think I know," I mutter to those who ask me what I think of the verdict.



On the day I drove to Fort Covington to meet up with the chain of events that would put me through personal changes too numerous to count, I was sure of one thing - the more I looked at the proposed power line project and the insanity of the poisonous likelihood of nuclear plants springing up like mushrooms all over the St. Lawrence River Valley the more certain I became that this was an action that must be faced head on. I may have to get arrested - the thought gnawed away in some corner of my mind-

Mostly I knew I couldn't, I had sacrificed for two years going to graduate school to earn a degree in counseling and I had the distinct impression that college professors and school administrators did not take kindly to actions that appeared radical. I wanted to work within schools and with people more than anything else I could think of; so I would stay away from any act of obstruction.

I just thought about all the folks freezing for days in the bitter winter cold with their few makeshift signs and decided I'd find time to go up on Friday as one more person, present and standing visibly against this madcap scene. Then the news over the radio. Stella Barse arrested! Four people linking arms around the tree all arrested! One more Indian woman standing still and defiant, saving the tree for another day. A phone call came down. They need people up in Fort Covington - Who is willing to go?



There is a blank stare I notice comes over people's eyes when you start mentioning danger to them and the environment. You mention the poison we eat and drink because industry has more political power than makeshift signs and they go blank - off somewhere safe I suppose - like they don't quite hear 'cause they don't want to believe it's true. They are worse than the people who believe what they are doing is right. They are worse than those out there stringing cable and clearing right-of-way because there are so many more of them and our hope lies in their waking from their sleep and they seem not to be really listening. I think they are scared. I know I am. I have other friends, people not riding with me to the Barse Farm this morning. I have friends who I have never met who are out there in the world - who are good people. They don't have to be fighting this powerline to be fighting the same evil. It's not this cause or that cause. It's how do you actualize yourself. Do you do it at the expense of others or do you share your own growth with the growth of your family and your community?



I'm there. I walk around writing a story in my head. It's so hard for me to take my own style of experiment with language form and turn it into narrative prose. I play with the idea that we are actually two different species fighting for the evolutionary future. I think in sociological terms as I watch the work force as a systematic unit. Later on I draw these thoughts together.

I'm struck that there are no children ever there. That they appear to all be male and dress in various forms of uniforms. That some seem to be in charge of others. That they stand around and service large machines. The vehicles seem to be of different kinds and there appears to be a correspondence between the type of uniform and which vehicle the men ride in. They cluster together and talk into boxes that seem to emit the sound of voices. Not all of the men are attached to these boxes but it seems that those who are are the most restless. They climb in and out of their vehicles and flap their arms alot. Some of the others seem more like us. They are a little bored and wish they could go home.

John Pietras approached the area close to the elm tree his workcrew wished to cut. I knew two people were resting high in the branches and was curious to see what he intended on doing. James Jasinski, a lawyer employed by the power authority, was there with a handful of copies of a preliminary injunction. I was standing and talking with Ellen Rocco. Pietras announced that trimming work on the tree was going to start. He seemed distraught, perhaps due to the events of the past week. He asked everyone to move one hundred feet away from the tree. I asked him to show me where a hundred feet was. I was wondering if perhaps he meant one hundred yards. He had a return that was so quick that I hadn't even finished exhaling when he said, "Serve him one," pointing directly at me.

I was walking away - plant trees, swim the river, leave politics alone and find any peace you can within yourself. Jim Jasinski set sail an injunction aimed at my back. Even though I was walking away these creeps were threatening me with jail! I was not obstructing - No one asked me my business. There was a reporter from the Watertown Times there - Jim Donnelly. He wasn't considered a friend of the protestors. He was standing close to me and the situation.

"You are a reporter, right?" I asked him. "Right" he said. "I hope your eyes are open I may need you later as a witness." I said.

What does it mean? There is so much complexity. I could be all wrong. I can't be sure. What do I really know anyway? Not all that much. Is it any wonder I would place so much store in the natural order of the universe? Don't kill the trees, I don't want to live in a world of metal and smoke. Leave me alone and let me go free that's all I ask.

Later in the day the police come - one of them sticks his finger in my chest. "We have positive identification on you." Why not, I wasn't hiding my face. "You are under arrest. That is all you need to know." I am dragged away and handcuffed in a patrol car and driven off to jail - "Oh boy, that's really illegal, they can't do that," someone sez to me later. Meanwhile, are you ready for a short lesson in Physics? When you heat water hot enough the water begins to boil. By this time I'm boiling mad!



A smaller car is traded for a larger car. I don't know whose car. More people want to ride in the car than there are room for. I have a hard time figuring who is going since I am not the only one giving away space. There are no favors being given. Some people should go if they want to go. There are many ways of getting there. These things work out and we must be off.

"Look at these. They won't be what you think"

Doug Jones passes an envelope to the front of the car where I am sitting next to Mary. Gail is driving. She wants to drive more than the rest of us. I don't care. I can be behind the wheel or I can be sitting in the passenger seat. I can't sleep in cars though. Gail seems to want the actual turning to be under her watch and care. It's as if the interconnection of parts must come out of her hands and flow from there into her life.

I already know what is in the vanilla envelope. We each know the envelope contains photographs. Doug and I live at the same farm and I've followed the whole progression of his bringing some old negatives up from his parent's house in Homer and going to the darkroom and producing fresh prints to send back to them. These are not photos of the actions in the Town of Bombay like we are used to seeing.

A picture of Doug's parents standing in front of a shining automobile smiling on their honeymoon. A picture of a brother dressed in a cowboy suit standing on the porch ready to draw his gun. A picture of a large table spread with food and family gathered around.



Mary begins speaking about creation. Doug Jones' pictures get passed back. A bottle of wine is moving. There are six of us in the car. watching conversation lapse into silence and back into conversation. Laughing in talking. A thought, bursting, fragmented and carried on into another thought. Until, when the silence comes, there is left some question about where exactly we are and how we got there.

When Keddy moves to the front seat Gail decides she is obstructing the rear view mirror. Together they work on a system to take care of the problem. My suggestions are largely ignored. Snug in the back Mary wants to sleep. The greyness of the day hides the dusk. There is blowing snow. Evening descends upon us. The headlights are switched on. Doug Jones moves to the front to drive. Gail trying to explain her and Keddy's system bursts up laughing because every mention of the 'codeword' sends Keddy into exaggerated motion.



This is our third stop in town. Already one person has split. One person is waiting for a phone call to get through so that we can open the church center for the people starting to come in from the countryside. I am listening to music. Mary brings me hot tea and a piece of avocado.

Out on the street
 traffic spins kids off
 on adventures, we all
 swallow the night
 when we start to ride.
 Something has got to be
 thrown somewhere.
 Listening to the hollow
 ring of the floor as
 keys jingle and friends
 talk excitedly.
 She sprinkles the salt
 from a tiny shaker,
 down naturally,
 the salt
 spreads out
 in its fall.



If I could hold on to just one thought
 for long enough to know
 Why my mind is moving so fast
 and the conversation is slow?

Neil Young
 'Barstool Blues'

'The Monopole', a bar with a phallic sounding name, hosts gatherings of the new primitive. I'm cynical enough to view the alleyway, the bar, and the scotch on even terms. I pull out my notebook and with the finesse of a caricature of a maestro conducting an orchestra conduct an interview with Doug Sharpe.

"How did you feel when you were arrested?"
 "When I saw the troopers walking up to us at the tree, my heart leapt for joy."
 "The Powerline?"
 "I really want it stopped."
 "Why?"
 "It's bad energy."
 I laugh. "Beautiful." I say to form a sort of conclusion.

Later in another tone he adds, "Changing the big wires is like changing wires in their heads." He tries to get the bartender to put on 'Workingsman's Dead'. "Oh yeah sure, we got that one, but how about waiting until this tape runs out?"

There's a Tibetan deity called Kali Durga. She's a woman and she's often pictured smashing babies heads or engaged in acts of warfare against the usual images of enlightenment. There's something there each time, in each form, each manifestation of the godhead. I'm on a temporal journey. I've left paradise. Kali Durga's the one who teaches the hard lessons. She's a real heavy among the multiforms. I know her pretty well. The images and actions are horrible since destruction is manifest as a gift of love. You've got to give up those attachments if truly want to free your spirit.



There are a lot of changes along the way. A lot of times you memorize all the words and think you know your lesson but it has not really sunk in. I had to face a lot of my own anger recently. It's been easy to play the role of victim. The problem with that role is like with most roles you freeze yourself in a certain relationship and that has a limiting effect. I just wind up getting more strung out and violent - enraged - and I end up with a book by Gandhi stuck in my backpack and I see myself off in a strange city, holed up in a strange apartment, one I've never set foot in before. Out in the streets, people, the traffic. Thinking that it's war. Thinking that it's war and you just don't know it's war because most of us have never experienced war before. Thinking I should read Gandhi and stay out of the war if at all possible. I open up the book entitled, Gandhi On Non-violence, edited by Thomas Merton. The first saying my eye hits:

"The lawlessness, if it can be so described, that I have advocated is like prescribing wholesome and necessary food for the body. Behind my 'lawlessness' there is discipline, construction and well-being of society. It is an effective protest against an unjust and injurious law or act. It can never take the form of selfish evasion of duty."

All this anger, this burning desire to bring revenge on my enemies, represents confusion. I suppose it's necessary that I stumble around, catch my reflection in a store window, get drunk enough to find the streetlights blurred, shoot like an electron from neuron to neuron, all that stuff - what I finally realized was that my own anger was my enemy. Like Stella Barse has said to put a stop to my ranting and raving, "I love them, it's their actions that I don't like."

Duty taking on a new form. I'm calm and I'm patient and my protest will be against the destruction of life. I'll free all beings and love them because only then can I be free, only then can love enter my heart. So easy to point at the other guy. It's really too bad that the only way to change society is to change yourself. Understanding this, that in fighting you too easily become what you behold.