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TITS ABOVE THE FOLD

By Judy Gumbo Albert, Ph.D.

INTRO: *The revolutionary moment we call women's liberation consists of hundreds of thousands of shards that together make up the mosaic or quilt that was our movement. I want to offer you a specific glimpse into one of those shards: the gender dynamics surrounding a well-known underground newspaper in the Spring of 1969. What I read is adapted from Yippie Girl, my memoir in progress. I do not claim to speak for anyone but myself. Everyone has their own 1960s. This is mine.*

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It all began for me at the *Berkeley Barb*. A doyenne of the West Coast underground press, the *Barb* was an aggregator, a *Huffington Post* with sex ads. I coordinated the sex ad classifieds. My ads held up the low end of the *Barb's* revenue stream; the paper's economic engine was

powered by full page display ads for records, concerts and most often for sex worker services. ‘BIG BUSTED BROADS OVER 21 looking for easy work with groovy hours & good pay. For Men Only,’ or, from Normandy Massage, “the best beaver, shaved and bushy, ever shown.” By feminist standards, I ought to have been appalled and dismayed at such blatant exploitation of women’s bodies for profit, but I was not. I needed -and I liked- my job.

My boss at the *Barb* was Max Scherr, the paper’s rotund editor and publisher. With hair combed over a balding head, a scraggly black beard and wire rimmed glasses, Max looked like a Hassidic Jew gone rogue. Office gossip had it that the *Barb* generated a profit of \$300,000 a year. Two times out of three a cartoon of a naked woman appeared on the *Barb*’s front cover, in accordance with Max’s mantra,

“Tits Above the Fold. It’s how ya sell papers.”

Contradictory images of women stay with me from the *Barb* days. Today I’d call it sexist, but I admired R. Crumb’s comic book heroine Lenore Goldberg, with her muscular thighs, dark wavy hair, big breasts and black leather stomping boots. Lenore, leader of the Girl Commandos possessed powers that I envied, she could karate chop a beefy, hairy cop POW! on the chin while shouting “JOIN THE WORLD-FAMILY REVOLUTION OR **DIE!!!**”

I also carry with me an image of Jane Scherr. Everyone thought of Jane as Max’s wife although they never married. On Wednesday nights, one staff person would drive the *Barb* to a printing plant in San Francisco’s Mission district. The rest of us descended on Jane and Max’s two-story house on Oregon Street in Berkeley. On its porch, a torn blue vinyl back seat of a car sat between white Corinthian columns like a southern plantation gone to seed. Jane’s kitchen looked as if a truck had dumped detritus

there: mail, yellowed newspapers, paper bags, photographs and an army of bottles – beer, molasses, vinegar, soy and hot sauce - marched next to a thrift store of cups and plates. I grew accustomed to seeing Jane bent over her ancient white kitchen stove, her brown hair stringy from steam that belched up from pots of boiling water. One Wednesday I asked Jane,

“Don’t you mind? Doing all this cooking, I mean?”

Jane brushed beads of sweat from her forehead. She spoke so softly I could barely hear her.

“No. Not really. It makes me feel useful.”

Jane had no income of her own. Rumor had it Max did not give Jane money to buy food to meet Max’s demand for the weekly *Barb* staff meal, Jane revealed to me decades later that she skimmed nickels, dimes and quarters from the cash receivables Max had her deposit into the *Barb*’s account. She told me, “It was never a good idea to ask Max for money. Because he would say no. Then call me stupid. Or a cunt.”

* * *

The FBI reported,

Subject THATS ME is now residing as a paramour of STEWART ALBERT at 2917 Ashby Avenue Berkeley, California. This house is frequented by members of the Black Panther Party (BPP) and white radicals including THOMAS HAYDEN who is currently awaiting trial re offenses occurring during the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

Anne Weills, who the FBI would have labeled Tom Hayden’s “paramour,” was a tall, blond, native Californian. I was a short, dark-haired east coast Jew. Anne considered herself a

serious revolutionary. I was a Yippie. Still, Anne and I shared a friendship based on our shared passion to confront injustice however we chose to define it. We sat one afternoon in my living room of the Ashby house, engaged in what today we might call team-building. From Anne's stack of magazines we cut out images of women with bouffant hairdos who posed in aprons in front of kitchen sinks or modeled bikinis to as a come-on to fancy cars. Such symbols of subservience demanded action: we would challenge traditional roles. And revolutionize our lives. Ours would be no invitation to a bridal shower. It was an invitation to a women's liberation meeting.

Many of the fifteen women in my group were, like Jane, members of the *Barb* staff or, like Anne and me, in relationships with a male 'heavy,' a 1970's word for home grown male leaders or celebrities. Anne started our first meeting by saying that she hated images of women that, just as today, infantilize us and turn us into sex objects

"I think its degrading," she said. Alta, a poet who published under her own imprint, (a rarity in those days) attacked any word that denigrated women as offensive to her sensibilities. "I hate the word chick. A chick is a baby chicken. And a bitch is just a dog. I won't let Simon call me an old lady either."

"Are we anything more than well off domestic servants?" asked Diane Lipton, her dark hair framed under square steel rimmed glasses. I knew nothing of Diane's home life except she was the wife of the *Barb*'s film critic who had achieved his 15 minutes by writing the words to '*Puff the Magic Dragon*' a Peter, Paul and Mary song. Jane picked up the narrative. She said, her voice again subdued, her eyes downcast,

"It's a revelation to me how everyone's experience seems to replicate mine."

Knowing Jane's situation, I needed to deny any similarity between the way my

“paramour” Stew Albert treated me and Max did Jane. I had yet to internalize the phrase ‘the personal is political’ with which Carol Hanisch would revolutionize the women’s movement that same spring of 1969. Our women’s group met every week; we were the militants; no woo-woo consciousness-raising group for us, no sitting around in circles venting feelings. We’d organize a march! For women’s liberation!. Beginning at Sproul Plaza. We’d demand the impossible: equality and freedom for women.

* * *

For better or for worse, I came of age in the macho, hetero-sexist end of the protest movement, before the phrase male-identified had entered our feminist vocabulary. Which meant that, by the Spring of 1969, I found myself swimming in a sea of freedom struggles: for Vietnamese independence, for liberation of African Americans and all people of color, for eight male Chicago Conspiracy defendants, but not as yet for me.

Then Bobby Seale, Chairman of the Black Panther Party asked me to give a speech two weeks before our women’s march. On May 1, the worker’s holiday of Mayday; at a Free Huey Rally in San Francisco. By then, I considered myself an expert on the topic of women’s freedom. At the rally, Stew stood twenty feet behind me pretending to be my bodyguard, along with Big Man, a Black Panther whose muscular, oversize torso gave him his name. Just as I opened my mouth. I heard Stew’s voice together with Big Man’s bellow,

“Gumbo! Gumbo! ”

Against my better judgment, I turned my back to my audience of 10,000 and shouted, “What the fuck do you want?”

“Do you know what you’re gonna say?”

The genuine yet patronizing concern in Stew's and Big Man's tone reaffirmed the righteousness of my cause. I yelled back,

“Shut-up you idiots. Shut up and listen.”

Then, as if I was combining Lenore Goldberg, Janis Joplin and a *Barb* sex ad, I kissed the mike as if it were a penis and began,

“As women we are getting our shit together. As revolutionaries we are learning and teaching those skills necessary for our survival. We don't hate men. We dig 'em. But when men continue to oppress us then they are part of the enemy. We will fight against our oppressors, regardless of their class, race or sex. We are part of the solution and we will ally with anyone who wants to overthrow this rotten system.”

To a chorus of, “Right On! Right On Sister!” I pumped my right fist in the air, and ended with a Black Panther motto,

“When you are fighting for your liberation, you must fight to the death on all fronts.”

My rhetoric was extreme; I had no understanding of the reality of death, let alone what it would mean to die for women's liberation, still, I stand by my statement: to fight for your freedom gives you life; anything less is a death.

* * *

Two days before our march, I handed Max a call to action. Max headlined my piece, *‘Why the Women Are Revolting.’* I, like Queen Victoria, was not amused. If I'd been familiar with the phrase passive/aggressive, I would have used it to call Max out. *Berkeley Barb* in hand I stomped Lenore-like, determined to right the wrong, toward the rear of the *Barb* office, muttering to myself but loud enough for all to hear,

“Max Scherr, you are a two-faced male chauvinist pig.”

Before I could speae, and without looking up Max said, “Too busy. Don’t bother me,” and dismissed me with a wave of his hand. *Why the Women are Revolting* appeared on page five of that week’s *Barb*. Instead of a graphic of a naked woman, a headline in three inch tall black capital letters read,

PIGS SHOOT TO KILL –

BYSTANDERS GUNNED DOWN

Our march for women’s freedom dissolved into the bloodshed that was People’s Park. I told myself it didn’t matter; I still considered women’s liberation as just one among many struggles. I also felt proud, despite Max’s demeaning double entendre, mine was one of the few articles not about People’s Park printed in the midst of battle. If I strip away what reads to me today like a turducken of rhetoric stuffed with cliché and basted with expletives (the only way I wrote in 1969) I still stand by what I said: If it takes revolution for men to accept that women are as good - no, better - than men are, so be it. We will have our freedom. We will not be ignored.

After the demise of People’s Park, I shifted my attention to class war: the *Barb* staff struck for higher wages. Max fired us. As well-trained collective who knew how to put out newspapers, we published the *Berkeley Tribe*. Not yet freed from the economic imperative that exploits women’s bodies for profit, our first edition of the *Tribe* contained one lone display ad of a naked woman from the Normandy Massage Parlor as well as updates on the Park, the Black Panthers, a police shooting and killing of a young African-American male, and a tear gassing of Berkeley’s Free Clinic. But on the *Tribe*’s front cover was a photograph, in anarchist red and black, of all forty-eight of us, rebel

Barb staffers, women and men, fully naked, our gender-neutral tits above the fold.

Decades later, our friendship renewed, Jane recalled a visit to our women's group. Our militancy, as militancy can, turned out to be deficient in compassion. Jane told me,

“I'd come to your house. I would try to go in, to take a few steps. But I knew I'd have to throw myself on the group's mercy and say 'he made me do it all, I've been hypnotized, now I'll leave him. I just couldn't bring myself to do that. So I'd sit in the car. And then go home.’”

Jane's nightmare was this: if she left Max, she'd end up homeless and begging on the streets. In the mid 1970s, Jane took her two children, Dove and Polly, left Max, sued Max for palimony and lost. She received minimal child support and next to nothing for herself. Jane went on to earn an independent income by becoming a portrait photographer. Max hid his assets in Aruba.

I would ever presume to speak for Everywoman, but in closing I'd like to offer you this: to live as a free woman you must find a way to put your metaphoric tits above the fold and face down all who oppress you. As Jane did, as Anne did, and as did every member of our women's group. For me, it took six more months.