

“ISN’T THAT ABBIE HOFFMAN OVER THERE?”

Tim was tapping like crazy on my wristwatch. “Jack, isn’t tat Abbie Hoffman over there?”

I peered through the smoke and shadows of Trader Vic’s to a bunch of people sitting in a hut near the back of the restaurant. “The bearded guy sitting next to the girl with the straight blond hair?”

“Don’t think so. Hippie revolutionaries would never sit inside huts. And they wouldn’t order drinks from waitresses in grass skirts with flowers around their necks.”

No smile from Tim. If anything, his frown deepened while the tapping on my watch grew more insistent. I could actually hear it.

“He’s got to drink somewhere.” He stopped tapping and slid his chair to the right to get a better view.

“And,” I went on, trying to be sarcastic, “I’m quite sure Abbie Hoffman wouldn’t ask for rum drinks with little blue umbrellas sticking out of them. Anyway, that guy’s too muscular. Hippies are the frailest people on the planet.”

“But just look at him.”

“Lots of people look like that. Right now, Abbie could be at the No Exit Café in Rogers Park drinking bad coffee or maybe he’s off with his lawyers figuring out what he’ll say in court or maybe he’s planning the next revolution with some old Wobblies in Hyde Park. He’s sure as shit not in Trader Vic’s surrounded by a bunch of plain old English teachers.

Tim ground out his Marlboro into the mermaid ashtray. “Did you know he was captain of his college tennis team?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means he’s an athlete. That’s why he looks so fit. Last week he walked into court on his hands. The picture was in the paper. There were all those lawyers and cops and defendants marching through the door and there was Abbie balanced on his hands. I bet that cop wanted to smash him with his nightstick. How many people can walk around on their hands?”

“Tim, that’s not Abbie Hoffman.” I sharpened the edge to my voice. I wanted to talk about John Holt, Jonathon Kozol and other educational reformers. I wanted to tell a few jokes. I wanted to tell him about the cheerleader from my school who was caught in the backseat of the Driver’s Ed car with her biology teacher at the school where I taught. And I really wanted to talk about the Cubs. No two people on earth loved the Cubs as much as Tim and I did. We had suffered privately after they’d blown the pennant last summer. Now we had to talk about that and also about the future. I looked over at him. “Did you know the Cubs have four future Hall of Famers?”

Tim moved his chair and kept on staring. “Look, Abbie’s in Chicago for the conspiracy trial. He and Rubin and Bobby Seale and the others are under house arrest or something like that. He’s got to relax somewhere, and this would be a perfect place because no one would expect to see him here. These guys are celebrities. The whole country’s reading about them. They need to lie low.”

“There are plenty of other places they could hide out.” Still, I did have to admit to myself that the bearded guy did look an awful lot like the person whose picture had been

in the papers practically every day for months. Last week in a sketch on the front page of the Daily News, he was furiously pointing a finger at Judge Hoffman. In the background of the photo, tied to a chair and bound and gagged was the Black Panther, Bobby Seale. And there were all those pictures from the '68 Convention. There was one of Abbie telling a small crowd his people intended to spike the Chicago's water system with LSD. My favorite was the photo of Abbie and the other Yippies standing in Grant Park next to Pigasus, a pig the Yippies had just nominated for president. I had watched the whole thing on television in a bar on the north side. But still, a guy like that would not come to a place like this. What was Tim thinking about?

I'd met Tim in the fall of 1964 at the English Education Conference here in Chicago. I was sitting alone in a half-filled room waiting for a session on "The New Grammar" to begin when this little man sat down next to me and held out his hand. He looked like every other nerdy English teacher – thick glasses, bad posture, dandruff.

Right away I started to like him. He paid attention during the session – nodding and taking some notes – and he even asked some good questions, but still he didn't take the meeting all that seriously. One time he leaned over and whispered to me that one of the panelists, a fellow from his district, had once been arrested for shop lifting hi-fi equipment from E.J. Korvettes. Later he nudged me and nodded to what he had scribbled on his notes: "The panelist on the right looks like a female impersonator."

Afterwards, we smoked a cigarette in the lobby. We both had planned to hear a Peace Corps veteran describe his experience teaching English in Tanzania, but we decided instead to go down to Trader Vic's where we polished off a couple of rum drinks. Tim told me all about his job in a small downstate town near the Mississippi. He

told me that his wife and daughter both played the violin, that he loved to teach *Othello*, that he was an assistant baseball coach, and that he had disappointed his dad when he hadn't taken over the family paper manufacturing business. I told him that my teaching job in the suburbs tired me out but I wasn't going anywhere else. I told him my wife and kids didn't seem to mind living in a small house and driving around in a shitty teacher station wagon.

I described the previous summer we spent in London, where I was doing research on a dissertation I would probably never finish. We both agreed the war in Vietnam was a crock of shit. What made it worse was that we couldn't do much about it except sign petitions and take part in peaceful demonstrations. We both had done our share of peace marching.

Later that night we took a walk through the Loop. Christmas stuff was already in the windows at Fields and Carson's along State Street. When we got to Michigan Avenue, we walked north to the Prudential Building and had a beer at the Top of the Rock. It was a clear fall night and we could see all the way to Hyde Park on the south and past Northwestern on the north. You could even see the Bah Temple in Wilmette. I was surprised how much Tim enjoyed the view, but he does come from awfully flat country. Towards the end of the evening, he asked me about my dissertation. He found the subject – the shifting standards of English – interesting, and he was concerned that I might just quit one day. I told him it was a matter of money and time. Plus, I didn't need a doctorate to teach in high school. "Tell me if you decide to quit writing it," he offered. "So, I can get you to keep going." I shrugged and said I would.

Every year after that, Tim and I would meet up at the convention. I'd have people to see and sessions to attend, but I'd make sure to meet him. We'd get rooms at the Palmer House and go out to eat and drink at the Berghoff or in Greek town or downstairs at Trader Vic's. It felt like college. He liked me because I liked him. I guess I liked him because he was so agreeable and because we had so much in common. I liked him because he reminded me of people I drank with in college – good guys that could bullshit about anything you wanted to talk about.

So I thought I knew the guy, but this fascination with Abbie Hoffman was something I hadn't expected. So, I moved my chair again. I was determined to talk about the Cub's. I spoke with authority, "Banks and Williams and Jenkins and Santo are all going to the Hall of Fame. Holtzman's got a chance too. People think the team will be demoralized after last year, but these guys are pros. What happened with the Mets was a fluke."

Tim did not even pretend to listen. He had a crazed look on his face I had never ever seen before and spoke in a deep resonating voice. "I'm going to go and introduce myself. I want to tell that man that I admire what he's done. I might be nothing but an English teacher from a hick town, but I know who to respect."

"Whom."

"Whom to respect."

"Are you serious? Do you think he wants to hear that?"

For the first time in a while, he stared right at me. "What's wrong with telling people you admire them? What's so preposterous about that? Hoffman made the Chicago cops show what they really are – PIGS. I like that. He woke people up. So, I'm going to tell Abbie I like what he did. Is that OK with you?" I was dumbfounded. Did he want me

to feel guilty for not being as excited as he was? I just didn't get it. "One more drink," I said. "Then you can go over there."

We had the drink and then another. Two other English teachers joined us. One guy was from England. After one drink, he started lecturing us about the great new ideas pouring out of his country: Classes were no longer teacher centered. What mattered was expression. Skills are out. The classroom was an open classroom – all that stuff. I had visited classes like this in London and seen kids working away on their own. In fact, I was trying out these new methods on my own students with some success. But I didn't need some asshole with bad teeth telling me what I should be doing in the classroom.

One time Tim started to get up, but I looked over and shook my head, and he sat back down. Later he stood up again but made a point of nodding towards the men's room, and I let him go. Right after he came back, the English guy started ranting about Vietnam. He raved on about Mi Lai and body counts, and the Tet Offensive and napalm. He wanted to know why didn't we all do something more meaningful to stop the war. "All you Yanks do is shrug and watch the bombs drop." The guy pissed me off, but I just didn't feel like arguing.

Two ladies carrying bags of boos walked in and stood in the middle looking for a table. Tim asked them to join us. One lady showed us a new edition of *Hamlet* with annotations and study questions. The other had picked up several paperback anthologies for underachievers. After she showed us the book, she announced that her husband had run off to Amsterdam with his secretary. She kept looking over at Time, but he ignored her.

Then suddenly Abbie – or whoever he was was gone. Somehow the whole group had left and the hut was filled with seven clean-cut young executive types. Tim stared at me with a stricken look. I shrugged and he looked away. The English guys were starting to leave. Tim snarled at them. “Where are you blokes going? Are you already sick of talking down to us?” They ignored Tim and walked away smiling. “Fucking assholes,” Tim muttered. I ordered drinks for the table.



It was 1:00 am and Tim and I were standing at the bar at the Earl of Old Town. The lady teachers from our table had shared the cab with us over there, but by now they had gone back to the Palmer House while Tim and I stayed for a few more beers, even though we had to be in workshops the next morning at 9:00 am.

I looked over at him. For some reason, he looked especially frail. “You’re sure you’re not pissed?” I asked.

“Why should I be pissed?” He tapped his empty glass on the bar to get the bartender’s attention.

“Because of Abbie Hoffman. I should have let you talk to the guy. At least we could have found out who he was.” I didn’t want this evening to end on a sour note.

“It didn’t matter.” He paid the bartender for two more beers.

“You’re sure.”

“I’m sure.”

“Then why did you decide to be such a bastard when those English people left?”

“He was a pedant. He was talking down to us. I couldn’t stand the way he said, ‘You Yanks.’ And you didn’t like him much either.” We were leaning against the bar. There were two people playing chess at a table in the back. At a table nearby was a girl writing. It was getting cold, and the open door was letting in a draft. I almost said something to the bartender.

“The guy was kind of s turd,” I said. “It’s easy for people like that to shoot their mouth off about Vietnam. He doesn’t have kids and families. We do. What are we supposed to do run through the streets and then go into hiding like those guys last fall? What does that prove?” I was sick of Vietnam. I was sick of telling people that a teacher deferment kept me out of the Army. I was sick of the people who were for it and almost as sick of the people who were against it. I was sick of people who were sick of Vietnam. Next week the seniors at my school had planned a “Teach In” to debate the war with the entire school. Several teachers were Korean War vets. The head of the music department had lost a son in Vietnam. It would be ugly, and I was the moderator. I didn’t want to think about it.

“The Cubs,” Tim was speaking in a loud drunken voice. “Let’s talk about the Cub’s.” Finally he was getting a little drunk. For such a small guy, he had amazing capacity. But instead of the Cubs, he talked about other things. One of the ladies we had met had propositioned him – “That fat slut wanted to give me her room key.” He was sick of his wife but he would never be unfaithful to her. His daughter really didn’t like playing the violin. He was afraid she had a learning disability. Lately his students were starting to laugh at him.

But what really bugged him was his English department chairman. “The guy’s a total loser. He’s a pusillanimous prick. He knows I’m the best but he won’t stand up for me. And he’s young, so he’s not going to die, but no one else is stupid enough to hire him and the administration won’t admit they’re wrong and fire him. So I’m stuck working for the fucker.”

I was about to throw in some dirt about my own chairman, but I stopped when I saw who had sat down at a table near the door. “Look,” I said. “Look who’s here at that table in the back. The bearded guy. There’s the blond girl.”

Tim weaved and squinted. “Big fucking deal. Maybe it is and maybe it isn’t. You were right; what would he be doing at a place like Trader Vic’s. And what would he say to an English teacher from Woodhull, Illinois?”

“Yeah, but this is Old Town. Isn’t this where you’d expect to find him?”

“This is a phony area and he must know that. This is Chicago’s pathetic attempt to have a Greenwich Village. There are a few bars like this phony place with peanut shells on the floor and some old beatniks and that’s about it. If it is Hoffman, he must really be missing the real places in the East. This dump is an embarrassment.”

I looked over at the bartender, who was pretending not to listen. I had a feeling he might be the owner.

“Look at it.” Tim went on. “There are chessboards and stacks of books just for effect. What phony bullshit!”

It was time to go. I grabbed Tim by the wrist and headed for the door. The owner – or whoever he was – was glowering and I didn’t blame him. He didn’t need some little weenie to tell him his place stinks.

On the way out, we stopped at Abbie's table. Tim stared hard at the bearded man, smirked, and gave him the finger. And then out the door we staggered.

Tim didn't seem to mind when I didn't get in the cab with him. I gave him a twenty and told the cab driver where to go. He was a young black guy. Next to him was a copy of *Soul on Ice*.

The bar was smoky when I walked back inside. I headed for Abbie's table and sat down at one of the empty chairs. "What's up with your drunken buddy?" the blond girl asked. From up close she looked old and a little worn.

"My drunken buddy's drunk. It's that simple. He's not used to all this booze. Sorry," I looked over at the bearded man. "He thought he saw you at Trader Vic's and now here. For some reason that really upset him."

"A lot of people think I'm Abbie Hoffman. Happens all the time. A couple of college kids last week asked for my autograph. Right in the middle of the train station in the waiting room." He spoke with a New York accent.

"Then you're not Abbie Hoffman?"

"What do you think?" He leaned forward so I could get a good look at his face. Before I could say anything, the bartender walked up and stood over me. "I thought you had left, buddy. You know if that little friend of yours had kept going on, I would have come around the bar and beaten the shit out of him and then beaten the shit out of you for being with him. I don't appreciate people saying bad things about my place."

They were all staring at me – the bartender, Abbie and his buddies, the girl writing alone, another couple that had just come in.

I stood up and stared right in the guy's face. I'd only been in two fights in my life and lost them both. I reached out my hand to shake his. He paused and then did the same. "I'm sorry. My friend was drunk. He's a teacher from a small town and he just had too much rum." I looked at the people at the table. "Abbie – or whoever you are – I'll apologize to you too."

Then I was out the door and into a cab.

I learned from the driver that Fred Hampton, a local Black Panther leader, had been murdered that night by Cook County cops in his apartment on the West Side. When we got to the Palmer House, the driver, an older black man, looked me in the eye and said, "Be careful, Man."

Back in the hotel, I walked over to the house phone and called Tim's room. The operator said he had checked out.