

Accidental Revolutionary

from [The Ballad of Ken and Emily: or, Tales from the Counterculture](#)

Abstract: Some people flow with the times like a chameleon changing colors with its background. Others reach a point in their personal development where they remain til death does them part. In this story, written during the Reagan regime, Ben Moses tells how he got hooked on the sixties, how he became a social deviant, and how being non-sexist was good for his sex life.

Some people flow with the times like a chameleon changing colors with its background. Others reach a point in their personal development where they remain til death does them part. I got hooked on the sixties and, although I tried to deny it midway through the seventies when the Me Decade gained the upper hand on the We Decade, I never could keep my chin clean shaven, and if weed destroys chromosomes it was too late by then to help me anyhow.

I survived the Me Decade. I came back to find that all the raps we spouted as youthful revolutionaries because gut level told us something was awry in Vietnam were still holding up under rational radical analysis. Capitalism, responsible once for the great technological advancements that revolutionized the world, was, indeed, a decadent economic system, but so was communism, as practiced in the Soviet Union. “Competition,” that bedfellow of “incentive,” existed still for only the unorganized masses who scrambled for the scraps tossed out by the capitalist monopolies and communist bureaucrats in the upper levels of power. And I still couldn’t hold down a steady job. I felt at home once again, as a mainstream social deviant.

Being a mainstream social deviant seems easy nowadays. With mainstream role models like Ronald Reagan telling us to balance the budget by cutting corporate taxes and increasing military spending and Billy Graham preaching that herpes will bring us closer to God, what else can you be?

But I’m no age-ist. You’re probably tired already of hearing people say, “Students nowadays are so apathetic. Why, when I was in college back in the sixties....”—so I certainly won’t begin this story by saying it.

But I wouldn’t say it anyhow because it isn’t so. Social deviancy is never an easy level of consciousness to achieve, even when mainstream leaders help us along. To me now, it only seems easy because I’ve been doing it for so long I don’t know where the mainstream is anymore. But my memory is still intact even though I’m past thirty. I can remember clearly when government leaders issued statements that I believed. “Peace with honor?” “Light at the end of the tunnel?” Don’t laugh, it wasn’t that long ago.

Back then, they drafted us for burning our draft cards or busted us for smoking marijuana; they kicked us out of school for wearing long hair or no bras. And then, through no conscious personal choice, we became pariahs in the land of our childhoods. We didn’t deviate from society; society deviated us.

The Vietnam War made accidental revolutionaries and social deviants out of a major segment of the baby boom generation. I was one of them, and that's the story I want to tell. You see, I missed being a stockbroker by five minutes.

The decade of the seventies was beginning its fifth month when my story takes place. I was a sophomore at Central Farm University in the central state farm country of Central Farm, Michigan. I wouldn't say I was apathetic then. I was just in a different psychic zone at the turn of the decade. America had been good to my family, who only two generations before me had taken cattle boats from the Old Country to Ellis Island and the slums of the Lower East Side. I had a happy Midwest middle class Jewish childhood. My parents voted for the man, not the party. I looked forward to graduation in two years and was already investigating the different stock brokerage firms in my hometown to see which one would be willing to send me back to school to get a Master's degree in Business Management. I planned to start looking for a wife as soon as I got settled in a good job. We would start a family as soon as we bought a house, and we would have at least three kids, to help replenish the Jewish population that had been slaughtered during World War II.

I was upset by the May 4 murders at Kent State but I drew no political conclusions. The significance just didn't compute. Rather, the fact of their happening didn't compute: FOUR-AMERICAN-STUDENTS-MURDERED-BY-AMERICAN-GOVERNMENT. Even now, is it any easier to stomach?

So, the next afternoon, May 5, when I stopped by the intramural football field, I was only interested in catching a bus to my accounting class. I was surprised to see about a hundred students standing in the end zone congregating in front of the rock that has traditionally borne the brunt of fraternity paint wars. It was painted bright red and the word "KENT" was spraypainted in black letters across the side facing the students.

A woman of about twenty stood barefooted on the rock and shouted to a listening audience, "Hey, man, they say we can't use certain words. I say why the fuck can't we?" She was wearing cutoff jeans and a cutoff blouse that was scant more than two breast pads. Long multicolored beads hung from her neck and ears and an Indian headband tied back shoulder-length blond hair. A strip of tan leather was wrapped twice around each wrist.

"What does it mean to be blackballed?" she continued. "What's *blackmail*? Whada they mean by 'nigger'?"

"You're talking criminal here," a husky bearded man shouted and another cried "Right on." The second man raised a clenched right fist, and I saw that he was wearing a black armband. The woman on the rock raised her clenched fist and a hundred clenched fists followed. If any of them were not wearing black armbands, I didn't notice.

A banner hanging from the branch of a tall elm tree and extending to one leg of the goal post

proclaimed “Solidarity With Kent State.” Another banner, hanging slightly lower than the first, cried “ROTC Off Campus.” A cleancut man wearing a light blue suit and dark sunglasses stood under the tree writing notes into a stenographer’s notebook. His similarly-attired companion was taking pictures of the crowd. Neither was wearing a black armband.

“You’re not gonna catch me out at one of those demonstrations,” I heard a voice say. “That’s all I need, to get busted for doing something that isn’t going to change anything anyhow.”

I turned around and saw Herbie Berman, the class brownnoser, talking at a campus policeman, who was walking anxiously past him. Herbie had a boyish face and was of below average height, so to compensate he walked with tight shoulders and slightly clenched fists that had nothing to do with ending the war. He was holding two red roses in his left hand, which meant he probably picked up a woman the night before at a party and got her back to her dorm two hours after women’s curfew hours. In his right hand was a copy of the Daily Bull, CFU’s student newspaper. I glanced at the headlines: “4 STUDENTS KILLED AT KENT STATE—Antiwar leaders call for student strikes.” The accompanying article announced the noon rally that was taking place right now and that was already into its second hour.

I surveyed the scene and noticed six additional campus police officers besides the one who had ignored Herbie. CFU only had about seven officers on their police staff. Then again, CFU wasn’t exactly a hotbed of crime or a bastion of political activity. For all I knew, this rally that I had happened onto was the first rally in CFU’s history.

There were the usual panty raids, of course. If I’m not mistaken, they were even officially sanctioned by the administration. Rumor had it that Old Man Kornwheat himself, the president, had participated in raids past in the spirit of relating to the students and encouraging them to let off steam. A line in the annual budget, right between “Pans—kitchen” and Parking tickets, blank—booklets of,” was reportedly reserved for “Panties, assorted—female.”

But the administration was not prepared to handle a protest rally. I shouldn’t have been surprised, then, but I was, to hear the sound of sirens. I turned in unison with the crowd and saw fifty police cars—I counted them, like I would cars on a train crossing the highway. Members of the state, county, and city police departments were represented in the procession, as were three paddy wagons.

I was scared for the demonstrators. A handful of them raced off the field. I watched them disappear into nearby dorms and cornfields. Those who remained began chanting “Pigs off campus. Pigs off campus.”

The head car crossed the grass and pulled up to the rock and President Kornwheat got out. He was a tall man, but a drooping paunch that looked like a beginners’ ski slope was his dominant characteristic. He wore a grey business suit that hung low at his shoulders. Streaks of matching grey highlighted his hair, which bordered his head like a horseshoe.

It's doubtful whether President Kornwheat would have been limber enough to actually climb the rock, but, in any case, he didn't try. Instead, he stood in front of it, blocking the speaker entirely except for her head, and he spoke. Never one to waste words, he said, "This is an illegal gathering. You must leave the field immediately."

"Fuck you, pig," someone shouted, and a roar of approval was heard, as he added, "This is a college and we're the students, not you."

President Kornwheat ignored the invitation to overreact. Instead, he waited until the noise died down, then repeated, "Everyone must leave immediately."

The looks of anger and determination on the faces of the demonstrators told me they had no desire to move. It's doubtful, though, that they could have if they wanted because there were more police than students and the students, including me, were surrounded. The police were dressed in full riot gear and gripped their billy clubs with both fists as they stood at attention. None of the police wore badges.

An awkward moment of silence filled the field as both sides waited for the other to act first. If there was solidarity among the students, it was without strategy. Only the police had a Plan A and a Plan B, or so I presumed. I saw a TV screen framing this scene that I seemed to be not a part of. I waited for Walter Cronkite to tell me how it was and what happened next and as I waited I whispered to a woman next to me, "I wonder what they'll do." I looked up then to see two policemen, each at least 6'8", marching angrily toward me. Was it because I dared to whisper? To this day, I don't know why they nabbed me first. Then, I was bewildered. I flinched as they grabbed me, each at one elbow, and pushed me toward one of the wagons with a billy club jabbed into the crook of my back to keep me moving. My armpits seemed about to tear as my legs stretched toward the ground so I could walk. "Officer," I pleaded, "I'm not part of this. I was just waiting for the bus." "Shut up, kid. That's what they all say," he responded, and I was frightened for my future. As they led me away, I heard someone whisper to someone else, "Who's he?"

Anyway, I was forced to fill out a questionnaire and then they hauled me away along with fifty other students, which was how many they could fit in the three paddy wagons. I was lucky some of the women had their purses with them because as soon as the truck I was in drove off they pulled out a leaflet that gave instructions on what to do if you were busted. I got hold of a copy as soon as I could and read it and reread it so many times I nearly memorized it. Even then, I would have reread it again if the guy next to me hadn't said, "Hey, Bro, I'm busted, too."

But I didn't give it a lot of thought after I gave the instructions to him because everyone else was having a great time laughing and chanting "Off the Pig" and "Smash the State" and calling each other Brother and Sister, and in that company how could I feel alone or scared?

When we got to the station, the women were separated from the men and I never saw them again

until I got out. We could hear them, though, and they could hear us, so we shouted at each other to keep our spirits up and we passed notes through holes in the walls wherever we found them. I was having a grand old time and so was everyone else. One Brother pointed to the cops, who looked shook up and confused, and noted the irony. “Funny, they’re the ones with guns and we’re the ones behind bars,” he said. Someone else shouted, “Prison is a state of mind,” and that was followed by a chorus of “Right on”s.

The mood became suddenly solemn then—relative to the previous pandemonium, that is—when Officer Grunt appeared with three other younger cops and shouted at us to shut up. Then, one by one, he called our names and directed us out of the cell. I was the first one called, probably because I was the first one who had been busted. I was handcuffed by a cop who was a foot taller than me and ordered to face left. Then he poked his gun in my head like it was a cattle prod and said “Get going.”

We followed a series of right angle hallways and blank walls until we arrived at the front desk, where Sergeant Nostrel sat, flanked on either side by a young patrolman. All three wore thin mustaches and sideburns that were trimmed evenly just above the ears. The two patrolmen had princeton haircuts. The sergeant was bald and smoked a cigar.

Like I said earlier, I had never been busted before so I had no experience to draw upon, and, since I was the first one they called, there was no one I could talk to to find out what to expect. I clung to the memory of the instructions for security. So, when the sergeant said to me, “What’s your name?” I recalled the line that read, “Don’t answer anything without your lawyer’s consent unless you have to.”

“Do I have to answer that?” I asked.

“Yes, you do,” he said, so I told him.

Then he said, “Is this your correct address?” and he showed me the questionnaire I had answered before I got thrown into the truck.

“Do I have to answer that?” I asked again, and he said, “Yes, you do,” so I said it was correct.

Then he said to me, “Are you single, married, or divorced?”

“Do I have to answer that?” I said, and he said, “Yes, you do,” so I said, “I’m single.”

Anyhow, the sergeant was clearly getting fidgety. I could tell because he broke the point of his pencil and had to get another one out of his desk. I knew he thought I was a smart-ass, but he looked like a high school jock so I thought he would at least respect my good defensive strategy. He might have at first, but respect turned to hatred when my defense beat his offense. It was about to happen.

With his free hand, he turned the form around so that I could read it and he pointed to an X at the bottom of the page. One of the patrolmen removed my handcuffs. Then the sergeant handed me the pencil and said, "Sign here."

I saw the next line on the bust manual: "Don't sign anything without your lawyer's consent unless you have to."

"Do I have to sign?" I asked.

His face turned as red as a communist, but I swallowed the irony. "Now look, punk," he said. The cigar fell out of his mouth, but no one dared to move. "No, you don't have to sign, but I'm getting fed up with your shenanigans. I've been real patient, but we don't like your kind in America and you'll sign if you don't want any trouble."

Well, of course, I didn't want any trouble, but the manual didn't cover what to do when threatened by angry sergeants and I was too new at this to improvise, so I decided to play out my original strategy and just do what the manual said. Also, I figured no one else was going to sign anyhow, so I didn't sign. I just said, "Hey, I would, ya know, but my lawyer said I shouldn't sign anything unless I have to, and well...."

I shrugged my shoulders like I was a victim of circumstance, but the sergeant didn't buy it. "You pinko lovers think you're pretty cute, don't you?" he said. He stood, and the force of his rising body against his swivel chair sent the chair crashing into the filing cabinet behind him. "Well, I don't like pinko fags." Six foot-eight of mass stomped over to where I was standing then, said "Get going," and ordered me to follow him.

When we got to the gate that led to the cells where the men were, I thought he would open it up and order me in, but he kept walking and so I kept following. Ten feet ahead, he stopped and opened a gate on the other side of the hall. Then he pushed me inside. A long hallway stood before me. On the right side was a blank wall. On the left were six empty cells. "Move," he said. We walked to the farthest cell from the gate. He opened the door and pushed me inside, then locked the door. Twenty-four angry steps led him back to the gate. I heard two more sounds, a slow grating "Creak" and a sudden "Crash." His footsteps faded into solitude.

As for me, I wasn't scared a bit—at first. I just stood there in disbelief and thought, "Naw, who's he kidding? Solitary? Me? For not signing my fingerprints?" He had to be bluffing, I thought. I figured he'd come back in five minutes, hoping to see me cowering in a corner ready to sign my fingerprints, a complete confession of guilt, and anything else he pushed in front of my face. I even thought he might have tiptoed back to the gate and was standing there right then listening in on me, waiting for me to scream submission.

So I did the only appropriate thing I could think of. I shouted, "Fuck you, pig," to show him I could

take anything he dished out. I figured he'd come in soon to get me anyhow because he had other things to do and he couldn't wait all day. I guessed he'd probably rough me up a bit and call me some threatening names to try and scare me so he could act like he'd gotten the best of me even though he couldn't get me to sign, and then he'd throw me in with the others and I'd be on my way.

Twenty minutes later, I suspected I was wrong.

Thirty minutes later, I thought I heard footsteps.

Forty minutes later, I knew I was wrong, so I sat down on the cold concrete floor to analyze the situation. Being in solitary doesn't offer much scope for analysis. Basically, you're there and the world is somewhere else and that's how it stays unless the cops let you out or the French storm the Bastille. It dawned on me that the odds of both were about even.

But then I heard the shouts and chants of my brothers, and I came alive and cried, "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité!"

An hour or so later—it was impossible to keep track of time because there were no windows in the cell or in the hallway connecting the other cells, so I couldn't even tell if it was day or night, but it must have been an hour or so at least—there was stark silence and I just cried because everyone was gone and I was still there and I was certain they had forgotten about me. I had to find something to do to help me keep my cool and also to keep my body active so my mind didn't get carried away. First I did 200 pushups. Straight. Then I did 200 situps. I was so sore I could barely think, and I wanted it that way because if I had thought I would have been scared. When I couldn't do another situp, I stood up and shouted every obscenity I could think of at the guards because I didn't know if the walls were bugged or not, but just in case they were, I wanted to show them that I was more angry than scared. Then I started walking around the cell. I paced 430 laps and my adrenalin was flowing and the only times I stopped were when I had to pee.

Well, you know how adrenalin is. The first five times I peed in the little hole in the far corner of the cell but it was already stuffed up with toilet paper from the last person to occupy the cell so the pee flooded the hole and dripped out around the edges. I felt dizzy from the odor, or from 430 laps around a tiny cell, or from both, and I thought I saw blood splattered on the wall. It looked like my blood.

Oh shit, I thought. On the wall. Shit on the wall? And people don't flush. What do people think handles are for? How do you say to someone, "Uh, excuse me, but, uh, are you gonna flush the toilet?" "It's none-a your goddam business if I flush the toilet." "Well, uh, yeah, okay, uh, I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings." "Well, fuck you." Oh, but there was no handle. Oh shit.

I shivered, like it was New Year's morning. I leaned over the hole because I thought I might throw up, but I held in the urge because the thought of puke combined with piss was criminal to my senses. It was criminal. Criminal.

Of course, I thought, though the revelation didn't dispel my nausea. No wonder there was no handle—a criminal could unscrew it and use it as a possible weapon. But I'm no criminal. I haven't done anything wrong. Aren't I innocent until proven guilty? I'm an American! My father pays taxes! And he flushes! Why can't they buy automatic flushers for those who don't? I proposed legislation for automatic flushers on all restroom pots. Sergeant Nostrel sat down on one and it registered. Then he leaned forward because he was nearsighted and he couldn't read the police report that was on the floor in front of him and the toilet flushed. Then he sat up and it registered again. I burst out laughing when I thought of that, but when a wad of toilet paper burst out in flames and would not be consumed I remembered where I was and I started screaming, "Why? Why?" And so the next time I had to pee, I peed right through the bars as far as I could send it, and I did it in the shape of a wet yellow Y.

How do I describe what happened next? Did I have a vision? I don't know what else to call it unless I called it a dream, but I was awake when I had it. I mean, I don't claim to be a Jeane Dixon or anything but I saw a scene in my mind that left an imprint as clear as that of a hot iron brand on the ass of a stallion. There I stood and before me was a yellow brick road leading to an intersection of one-way paths that veered off diagonally to the right and to the left. To the right was an ivy-colored building whose back door led to a smoothly-paved concrete road that ran indefinitely through a barren forest. To the left was a road so wide it ceased to look like a road and appeared to me as a massive void. I didn't recognize it as being part of anything I had ever experienced. Straight ahead in the distance on the second road, tiny but visible, was a wonderful oasis, and then another void.

I didn't know what it all meant but I became scared and exhausted and fell asleep for the first time in solitary. Only the recognizable grunt of Sergeant Nostrel calling my name woke me.

"Still here, eh?" he laughed, as if he didn't know. He had gone off duty soon after locking me up by myself and he didn't tell anyone I was there.

"How do you like being a pinko now?" he asked.

"If I told you, I'd spoil it for you," I said.

He pushed me and told me to move. Then he led me back to the cell I had left eighteen hours before. By the time I re-arrived, everyone else had been arraigned, except for two guys. The first was the Brother who had pointed out, before I got hauled away, how the cops were more shook up than us. He was a short guy with a weightlifter build and wild shoulder-length Semitic hair that was parted in the middle. "So you're Ben Moses," he said. "We gave up on you long ago." He said his name was Goldberg.

The other guy was about twice the mass of Goldberg with a flabby football player's build and thin blond hair. His nose ran in a way that looked habitual, but neither he nor Goldberg paid attention to it. "That's my buddy, Baren," said Goldberg.

“Goldie’s the best revolutionary in the world,” said Baren.

“Hey, cut the crap, Baren. I’m just a fuckup like you.”

Baren seemed comforted by Goldberg’s reassurance.

“I’m a little scared,” I admitted to Goldberg because he looked like someone I could talk to and I had thoughts I didn’t think I could hold in much longer.

“You ever been busted before?” he asked.

“No.”

“No wonder.” He smiled and I felt close to him. “I was scared, too, the first time I got busted for organizing, but it gets easier.” His smile turned into a forced laugh and I felt slightly comforted. Then he added, “There goes your clean record. You’re a social deviant now. Congratulations.”

He shook my hand, sheltering the back of it with a cupped left palm, as the guard opened the gate and called his name.

Baren looked at him with an expression of terror. “What am I gonna do without ya, Goldie?” he pleaded, wiping his nose with the back of his sleeve.

“Hey, you’ll do okay, Baren. Pretend.” Goldberg winked at me and I took his cue.

“We’re almost outta here. We’ve got nothing to worry about,” I said softly, even though I had no idea what to expect.

Baren sat silently, with only an occasional whimper.

I was arraigned fifteen minutes later, shortly after Baren. I was the last one released from prison. When I opened the door to freedom, I was met by Goldberg and Baren and all 48 of our fellow bustees, or at least it seemed that way to me, who greeted me like a hero because Goldberg told them I had been sent to solitary. We were Brothers and Sisters, forced to live on society’s edge, Goldberg said.

That night, I got it on with Karma, the Sister who gave the speech on the rock. I was turned on to her by the way her hair hung down over her shoulders from under her headband, but that seemed like a pretty non-revolutionary reason to be turned on to somebody, but I didn’t know how to approach her without appearing sexist. I thought of hugging her as a comrade, but I didn’t want her to think I was putting the moves on her. I thought of slapping her rear like the guys on the football team, but I didn’t want her to think I was macho. I finally just said to her that I liked her speech. She

liked that I wasn't aggressive and said she wanted to sleep with me.

Later, at her apartment, when I tried to take her clothes off, she stiff-armed me and said she wanted to get to know me better before we had sex. Then she asked me what I thought about the Israeli government because she knew I was Jewish. I couldn't figure out what that had to do with having sex, but I didn't want her to think I was treating her like a sex object, so I tried to answer her question. During my rap, I mentioned some pros and cons about erecting a bi-national state and was sure she saw through my Freudian slip. She did. In fact, it turned her on and she attacked my body so fast she ripped the buttons off my flannel shirt. I got nervous and came as soon as I was inside her. I was embarrassed and said, "Not much of a fuck, eh?"

"We didn't fuck, we related," she said, "and I'm satisfied."

This being non-sexist is real tricky, I thought, but I think I'm gonna like it.

Postscript

In the next week, we organized the CFU 51 Defense Fund so we could fight the government as a united front instead of being picked off as fifty-one individuals. Our fight soon became a focal point of the whole campus and off-campus antiwar communities. To help keep each other informed and to spread our propaganda throughout the rest of the city, we organized an underground paper because the campus paper's editor was handpicked by the administration and he wouldn't touch the subjects we wanted to deal with.

When we started receiving papers similar to ours from similar communities all over the country, we came to see in ourselves a valid community that could exist separately from the mainstream one if we organized apart from it to provide our basic necessities.

Food co-ops sprung up organically, and so did housing co-ops and bike co-ops and printing co-ops and daycare centers and we organized rallies and we marched and some of us got busted a second time and a third time, but we were committed by now to deviating in every possible way from whatever was generally perceived by the mainstream culture to be the norm because that entire culture was seen by now to be intertwined with the war machine and our community had the strength of a unified nationwide movement. When our deviant Brothers returned from Nam, where they were fighting our fight only on a different front, we united.

And we won the Vietnam War. But then we looked around us and saw the work that still had to be done: fighting in the Mideast and South Africa and Central America and nuclear leaks all over the country and poverty increasing and all the social isms still diseased and spreading. Then Vietnam invaded Cambodia and then Cambodia invaded Vietnam and then Vietnam invaded Cambodia, which by how was calling itself Kampuchea, and we weren't ready to choose sides because we had spent so much time supporting them both that we couldn't tell the difference between them and by now some of us had children.

So we burned out and went inside ourselves. Individually. We were no longer together. The Me Decade will surely be seen in retrospect as one of the bleakest periods of our young nation's history, second only to the Reagan years.

But we survived as individuals and came together again to find that our best friends were still those we had run the streets with and done time with and gotten high with during the Vietnam War, only it took another jolt from our mainstream role models to bring us together. Because El Salvador and Beirut smell an awful lot like Vietnam, and nuclear power just smells. And a Holiday Inn stands in the heart of Central Farm, where the underground paper house used to be.

And a nation is pregnant with another generation of deviants.