The Strawberry Statement—
Notes of a College Revolutionary
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RANDOM HOUSE
NEW YORK
To my distinguished colleagues,
associates in the field,
revolutionary cohorts, parents,
siblings, my friends and my
enemies, everyone I’ve known
and everyone I’ve yet to meet, and
especially everybody else

For Laura—someday I may
deserve her
Saturday, July 13: We had come 180 miles to Kingston and we slept in the car there.

The next morning Laura was telling me that I had a cold and for the sake of my health she swore it we should head back to New York. She pleaded with me, not realizing that I might have gone on to Toronto at gun point.

So, having spent ten minutes delving into the exile situation in Canada, we headed home. We hadn't had a meal in a day and we had maybe enough money for gas back to the city if we avoided paying any tolls.

As a last resort we hoped we could barter cigarettes for fuel. We went over a suspension bridge into the U.S. It was one of those with a metal grate roadway. If you stick your head out the window and look straight down it looks like you're suspended in air a hundred feet over the river. That also helped make the trip worth it.

We told the toll collector we had no money so he took our address for billing without much hassle.

Canadian customs waved us through but the bored civil servants at the American customs office had been waiting for us all day, maybe all year.

We had to pull over and go in. He asked me who owned the car and then quick where does he live. I knew where he lived.

Does your cousin know you have his car? I wanted to say, "In the broadest sense, does anyone know who has his car?" But I didn't and we were on our way.

 Canadians are nicer than Americans, or at least they're nicer to Americans than Americans are.

As we moved south gas stations accepted our play money with increasing reluctance and markdown or markup or whatever you call it.

We finally reached the environs of New York with little gas and no money (actually one cent, but it was a gray one and I didn't want to spend it). We lost our way and stopped to ask a man for directions into Manhattan. He said that he had just arrived from Toronto himself and had looked for three hours for a place to stay. He chatted, patting my arm, and gave us good directions.

"Canadians," said Laura.

"Yeah," I agreed. "Canadians."

We drove into the city via the toll station exact change booth, into which we threw no exact change.

Sunday, July 14: Relating events becomes difficult when there are no events to relate.

Monday, July 15: I went downtown to try to get my tape recorder repaired, trying not to get a parking ticket while I was at it. I failed in both endeavors.

"This is a pretty old machine," said the man in the service department.

The thing's six years old. If it were a kid it'd be in the first grade. But you're not supposed to have bought a tape recorder that long ago, and if you did, you're not supposed to have kept it.

So the man couldn't fix the microphone, but he sold me a plug for $1.50. One dollar and fifty cents. I would have been able to go to the movies six times for that when I was a kid.

July 15, 1972: The young man walks into a restaurant. "I'll have a cheeseburger," he says. "How much?"

Says the counterman: "That's $8.00 and $1.60 tax makes $9.60."

"How do you sell them so cheap?"

"Volume."

"Well, here's a $500 bill and let's see if I have the 60 cents. Nope, all my change rusted again."

Back at the apartment I read a mimeographed paper by Tony Papert called The Mass Strike. It began:

The coincidence of Columbia and Paris should dispel the dominant illusion of the left in this country: That our radicalism is derived
mainly from the particular issues of the Viet Nam war and racism . . . In fact, our Viet Nam and racism issues are only particular manifestations of far deeper forces simultaneously energizing mass actions in diverse parts of the advanced capitalist sector.

That may not be terribly surprising, but it hit me kind of hard. Like it dispelled my dominant illusion.

(We youths say "like" all the time because we mistrust reality. It takes a certain commitment to say something is. Inserting "like" gives you a bit more running room.)

I've never been much of a political comprehension man. I'm more of an issue man. I don't know much about the capitalist sector, but I know what I like, and I don't like the Nam war or racism. Papers like The Mass Strike just don't speak to me right now.

But I thought that Papert might, so I went to see him in the evening. We went to a bar and talked over the bourgeois blare of a Jerry Lewis movie on the decadent color TV on the wall.

Papert is head of the SDS Labor Committee. The Labor Committee is sometimes referred to as the thought faction, as opposed to the action faction, of SDS. I thought I might pick up a few thoughts.

I asked him, with some embarrassment over the incredible simplicity of my political consciousness, what difference it makes who the Trustees are.

He said it's not important who they are; it's what they do. What they do is use the University to shape, train, and funnel manpower, for the needs of the American capitalist empire.

I asked him if he thought we'd made any mistakes in the strike.

He thought we'd taken a political step backward by organizing on a constituency basis. Students should play an important role in the revolutionary process, yet we have students concentrating on student gripes, letting blacks worry about blacks, women take care of women, laborers labor, and so on.

Essentially what he said was that everybody's got to be together in a big thing. Local organizing around parochial issues is not the way. The first proper step is to educate everybody to the fact that what's putting them down is the capitalist system.

The Labor Committee was currently leafleting garment workers.

I asked him whom he wanted to be the next President of the country. I wanted to know if it was possible for me to be a decent radical and still root for Clean.

He said liberals like McCarthy are concerned with co-opting militants, especially black nationalists. That's what local control is about: the classic Fascist method of destroying a movement by isolating little groups to deal with the top. That way you give them the traffic light or the textbook they want, but never freedom. Therefore, it would be better for the movement if "one of the flunkies," Humper or the Dick, were elected. Then there wouldn't be any co-opting sops thrown to the people, and the Revolution could go on developing.

It seemed to me that he was essentially saying that people should be kept unhappy so that they will know they're unhappy. They mustn't be fooled by improvement of things. I agree that Clean tries to co-opt people with little things, but if they're a little happier for it, I'm for it. Let the liberals do their little reforms and if they're really meaningless sops, the people will decide that and keep pushing.

I asked Tony if he would do anything to build the Revolution, and he said that he would.

Then we talked about gun control laws.

He, like all the real radicals, was against gun control legislation. He pointed out, correctly, that with the new laws, eighty percent of the blacks would not be able to get guns. Also leftists couldn't get them whereas all the flaming Bircher's and suburban reactionaries would be armed to the teeth. He said the Constitution guaranteed the right to bear arms in order to counterpose an armed populace to the armed state. That's true. And he said real gun control isn't possible until you disarm the police. I agree but
the police aren’t about to be disarmed, certainly not while other people have guns. He said the real point of the legislation is to prevent the blacks from defending themselves against the cops who shoot them every day. I wonder, if that’s true, why Wallace and Southern senators are against gun control? Anyway, if the blacks get armed, the police will just use it as an excuse for more shooting, and in shoot-outs the state always wins. They’ll bomb out blocks in Harlem if they want to.

I just don’t like guns. I don’t want anybody to have them. People who talk about this or that group being better armed than another are talking as if they were playing some sort of game where you move gun pieces around to best advantage. They couldn’t realize that in real life you don’t draw a card that says “dead,” you feel bullets tearing into you and breaking your bones and leaving holes out of which all your blood runs as you lie in the gutter dying. I don’t want that to happen to any person, including persons who for good or bad or no reasons are cops. There must be better ways to fight guns than with guns, and if there aren’t we ought to think up some. If we get guns we’re just like them and have no right or reason to fight them and everybody would be better off without us.

Tuesday, July 16: Right now I’m not in favor of a Revolution, but only for the same reason I’m against writing the Book or going to Liberation classes. They all take energy, and it’s 96° in the big city. There are times when ideology has to bow to meteorology.


Also I started thinking about forever. I’m scared of forever. Forever anything. I think it would bother me if I was told I would never be sick, healthy forever. But then it occurred to me that forever need never be endured, only one day and another and today. And that doesn’t take much time. Anyone who’s been both nine and nineteen should have a pretty good idea how fast ten years can go.

Then I heard the radio again, an ad. “CM—Mark of Excellence.” I started laughing, thinking of an emendation: “GM—mark of bullshit.” It struck me as funny.

At three o’clock I have an appointment to interview the Programming Director of WABC radio, a station perfectly exemplary of the amplitude modulator pop facet of contemporary American culcha.

I am of the opinion that the United States is engaged in a controversial war in Southeast Asia, and that the country has other problems, too. I think people ought at least to think about these things, but I’ve noticed that the radio medium is a tremendous airy goof ball, which anesthetizes everyone who listens. I’m curious about the motivation of the people whose 50,000-watt pump pours such crap into the already polluted air.

The sounds of Summerpower radio wafted over the sidewalk as I approached the ABC building. Fighting to maintain my alertness, I noted that the plants in the lobby were real. Obviously the seat of empire, here. It was one of these places where you know what you’re up against as soon as you see the computer-dispatched elevators.

Gold shirts, purple shirts, double-breasted jackets with necktie/hankie sets scurried by me.

“Hi, lover.”

“Hello, baby.”

It seemed the employees were happy. Buckle shoes. Short hair with long sideburns. The entertainment industry’s parade.

After I waited half an hour in his corridor (his secretary had ABC playing over a speaker on her desk. Did she have to?), Mr. Sklar invited me in.

Perhaps he thought I’d come with the intention of seizing the station, but for one reason or another he was very edgy and defensive.