

Fire

I had never been on a school bus. All of the base schools I attended were close enough to walk to, and El Molino was just a short bike ride away. Between needing my bike for after school deliveries and simply wanting to ride it every chance I got, there hadn't been a day that I'd stooped to riding on the noisy yellow school bus.

I imagine a high school bus is a jungle on a good day, fill it with excited teenagers headed for San Francisco and you've got a riot on your hands. I sat near the front of the bus with a couple girls I'd gotten to know from working on Mr. Flynn's class project. We had a pretty good view of the scenery ahead and could avoid most of the chaos happening in the back seats. We were also just a seat behind Mr. Flynn and could chat with him during the ride. He was a teacher, but he was also pretty cool.

Several times he stood up and raised his peace sign toward the roof of the bus. This was mildly effective but it wasn't long before the volume ramped up again. Finally, he

stood and rather than flashing the peace sign, he pointed. He had an expression on his face that we rarely saw in his classroom and the response was immediate silence. I don't know how the student that walked toward the front of the bus knew that Mr. Flynn was pointing at him, but he arrived a few seconds later and plunked himself into the seat next to Mr. Flynn. After that, the bus ride was relatively calm and we had a chance to talk about what, and more importantly who, we hoped to see in the city.

A group of us had gotten together the weekend before the trip to listen to records in someone's basement, and one of the songs played was a new record by a singer named Scott McKenzie. We'd never heard of him before, but the song was on all the radio stations, and because of its title and lyrics it was a perfect anthem for our trip. Once the bus had quieted, you could hear a number of students humming the melody of "San Francisco," and like the song suggested many of the girls had put flowers in their hair. We didn't know what Scott McKenzie looked like, but if he happened to be hanging out on the streets of San Francisco with Janis, Grace, or Jerry, we'd be happy to meet him.

As the bus pulled off the highway and wound its way through the city streets, our faces pressed the windows. It didn't take long for a bunch of kids from a small town to forget who we were looking for, as we craned our necks to see the buildings that towered above. We were all excited, and the bus was filled with chatter whether we saw our idols on the street corners or not. Before we knew it, the bus was

pulling to the side of the street and we filed off into a plaza in front of City Hall.

The voice on the megaphone was the first thing I noticed. Maybe hearing the drone of the school bus for hours made my ears overly sensitive, but the voice was grating and seemed aggressive even though the words were lost to distortion.

As we walked across the plaza, my eyes scanned the scene and found the source of the voice. A man stood about halfway up the steps to the building. He faced out toward the plaza and seemed to be preaching to the pedestrians hurrying off to their offices, but occasionally he turned to point the megaphone at City Hall as if addressing a particular comment to those inside.

His voice was still garbled, and I could only make out a few words at a time. "Police action... illegal... Vietnam." The last one made me stop in my tracks and turn to look, but whoever was behind me in line walked right into me and grumbled an irritated, "Hey, com' on."

I started walking again, and as we got closer to City Hall I got a better look at the man behind the megaphone. I had never seen a hippie, but I knew what they were I guess. Most adults would call the musicians we were hoping to spot in San Francisco hippies, and more than a few of them would label us with the term just for listening to their music. I didn't think Janis and Jerry were hippies, and I didn't think of myself as one, but I was pretty sure the man with the megaphone fit the bill.

He wore clothes that looked like they were hand-me-downs of hand-me-downs. His pants, covered in patches,

drooped on his skinny waist. Over his tie-dyed shirt was an old army jacket. Where the insignias had been were gaping holes, as if tearing the patches off wasn't enough and the fabric beneath had to be ripped away as well. There was anger and desperation in his voice, like he couldn't help but shout his message, and the arm not holding the megaphone gestured violently to emphasize his point.

Mr. Johnson grumbled about hippies from behind his newspaper most afternoons. He sometimes called them "freaks," or when there was a particularly offensive piece of news, "pinko commies." I got the sense that Mr. Johnson was more troubled by their political views than their musical tastes though, so Janis and Jerry were probably safe. But if the man shouting from the city hall steps was a hippie (or a pinko commie for that matter), I knew I didn't want to be one.

"Stop American imperialism!" his voice squawked through the megaphone. "Stop this illegal war!" As we walked past, the amplified voice was loud enough to hurt. I scowled and covered my ears. The man must have taken my reaction as disagreement and directed his next pronouncement at me. "American soldiers have the blood of children on their hands!" His eyes glared at me over the top of the megaphone and followed me until I turned away and broke into a run, pushing my way to the head of the line past Mr. Flynn, not stopping until I'd reached the top of the steps and put a stone pillar between us.

Now I understood Mr. Johnson's anger at the headlines he read. That hippie was wrong, and I wished I had

a megaphone of my own so I could tell him so. How could he know what he was talking about anyway? My father was over there, so I knew. American soldiers were in Vietnam helping people. They were protecting them from communism. That must be a good thing. If it wasn't, my father wouldn't be over there doing it.

A soft touch on my shoulder made me realize that I was squeezing my eyes shut and digging my fingernails into my palms. Mr. Flynn was standing over me.

"Everything OK, Elizabeth?" he said in a voice that told me he knew everything certainly was not.

"Yeah... Sure... Just a lot of steps to climb." I said, adding a couple deep breaths for effect.

A quick glance down the steps toward the hippie was enough to show me that Mr. Flynn had already figured me out. "Lots of opinions in a big city, Elizabeth. We can cover our ears when we hear one we don't like, or we can choose to listen to all of them and try to figure things out for ourselves," he said in a voice that was different than the one he used in his classroom, not like he was teaching me something but like he was sharing something that he knew. "And besides," Mr. Flynn continued as he opened the door for me, "You ride your bike all over town every afternoon. You could climb those stairs ten times without breaking a sweat."



The tour of City Hall was what you'd expect from a field trip to an office building. We saw some rooms with desks and typewriters that all looked the same, but as we

entered each one Mr. Flynn's friend explained how it served a unique and important role in the functioning of the city. That may be true, but I'm not sure because none of us listened.

The highlight of the tour, which isn't saying much, came when we all filed into the press briefing room. The room didn't look anything like the fifteen other rooms we had been in, so that was a positive. Normally, the space would be filled with reporters waiting to get the scoop on some announcement from the mayor, but either they'd cleared the room to make way for our class, or more likely it was just a slow news day. We sat in the chairs that would normally be filled with reporters and listened when Mr. Flynn's friend stood at the podium in the front of the room and explained why a press briefing room had a unique and important role in the functioning of the city. He went on to tell us that he had hoped the mayor would be able to meet with us but there was an important development and he couldn't make it. Instead we were each given an official City of San Francisco pen and a pad of paper with the city's emblem printed on it. Mr. Flynn, whose enthusiasm for our trip to City Hall had been limitless and totally unrelated to the music scene, seemed unfazed at the way things had turned out. We collected our things and gave a chorus of thank you's to Mr. Flynn's friend, then we wound our way back through several of the unique and important rooms and ended up back in the lobby.

I knew something was different before we even made it through the doors. I could hear it. There was still

a garbled voice on the megaphone, but behind it there was something else. Something that sounded like the ocean. I half expected to see waves crashing against the steps when we exited the building. And in a way, I did.

There were people. Hundreds? A thousand? Too many to count. The plaza between the steps and the street had disappeared and in its place was a sea of bodies, some with arms raised and peace signs flashing, but many more had curled their two-fingered peace sign into a shaking fist. They were mostly hippies like the man with the megaphone, lots of them. But there were other people too. People that looked like they could be working behind a restaurant counter or selling newspapers at a stand on the corner if they weren't outside City Hall shouting.

"No war! No war! No war!" It was easier to understand once we were outside the doors. A constant pulse of voices. Waves crashing. It sounded like the ocean, but it looked like a fire. We were right in front of the center where things seemed the hottest, where everyone had an angry face and a fist in the air. And that anger seemed to be spreading, catching the ones who were next to it, and the ones next to them. Farther out on the edges things were just starting to warm up, but those people kept pressing closer, moving toward the heat in the center and catching its flame. And beyond that were the sparks, people just walking by on the street or strolling through a nearby park. Just regular people until they heard the noise or saw the crowd and came closer, closer still, and then caught fire too.

There was no going down the steps. Pick your metaphor. We'd be diving into the ocean, walking into the flames. Either way it wasn't happening. Mr. Flynn's calm was shaken. His head turned side to side, taking in the crowd, and then back toward the doors like he wasn't quite sure which way we should go. Mr. Flynn's friend must have figured out something was wrong and followed us through the doors. He stood beside him and over the chanting I could hear bits of their shouted conversation.

"...wanted them to see..."

"...ever this big?"

"... never like this before."

It was easy to fill in the missing bits. Just like us, Mr. Flynn had an agenda of his own for our trip. He wasn't interested in the music scene, but he wasn't interested in the insider's tour of City Hall either. And if we'd thought at all about what Mr. Flynn had told us about the trip rather than getting so worked up over who we might see on a street corner, we'd have realized that the trip to City Hall wasn't Mr. Flynn's style at all. He taught us to be thinkers, to exercise our curiosity, and to question the way things were. There was no way he'd have made such a big deal about touring an office building. Maybe if we were going to sit down with the mayor for a question and answer session, but Mr. Flynn would have made us prepare for that, would have had us writing questions weeks in advance and tossing out the ones that didn't address an important issue.

No, Mr. Flynn didn't bring us to San Francisco to see what was inside City Hall. He wanted us to see what was happening outside. He wanted a bunch of kids from Smalltown, USA, to see what some people thought about what was going on in Vietnam, wanted us to discover that there was more to current events than Mr. Johnson's newspaper headlines. But the mob scene that was steadily growing on the steps below us was more than he'd bargained for. We were no longer witnessing current events. We were about to become part of one.

Before Mr. Flynn and his friend had a chance to figure out how to get twenty-five teenagers through a crowd of hippies, freaks, and pinko commies, the situation went from bad to worse. The wail of a siren could be heard over the roar of the crowd and three or four police cars appeared. The reaction was immediate, as if someone tossed a can of gasoline into the fire.

The crowd exploded. For those on the fringes, the arrival of the police meant that the party was over and they needed to disappear as quickly as possible. They'd been on their way to someplace else anyway and had only gotten distracted by the shouting. Hurry along to your job in the restaurant or selling papers on the corner. But for the angriest, the ones in the hottest part of the fire, the police were just another part of what they were protesting – the government, the army, the police—just different parts of the same broken machine. A moment ago the crowd was protesting soldiers in far away Vietnam, but uniforms were

uniforms and their ire immediately turned on the blue ones emerging from the police cars. For one breathless second, I thought that the crowd was about to attack the police. It didn't seem possible for that much anger to stay in one place. But instead, they moved away from the police and toward the doors of City Hall.

I didn't have time to think about it then. Replaying the scene in my mind later, I tried to puzzle out why things happened the way they did. Maybe some protesters were just trying to get away from the police, and through the doors was the only way to go. Maybe some knew they were minutes away from getting hauled down to the police station and figured they might as well make the most of the time they had to get their point across. The most calculating must have known that the police were the tipping point, creating enough anger that the crowd could be nudged to do anything. Whatever the reason, the protesters in front of us collectively decided that they all needed to get into City Hall.

In a blink I lost my vantage point at the top of the steps and became a part of the scene I had been watching. Faces flashed by me. I stumbled but didn't fall, bodies pressed so tightly together that I couldn't fall. I would catch a glimpse of a classmate, and then they would be gone.

The surge squeezed the breath from my lungs. People pushing, people being pushed from behind, and more behind them, all rushing toward City Hall. But the doors opened out, and we were getting crushed against them. I tried to scream, but there was no room for it. And then

somehow, mercifully, someone got a door open and the crowd spilled through like a flood.

All I wanted to do was get away, to move far from the chaos at the doors, but instead I was pushed toward it. Another door was opened, then another, and the flow through them increased. I moved without taking steps. If I'd stayed where I was, the crowd would have washed over me, so instead I moved with it as it surged through the doors.

The spacious lobby made running instantly possible. People ran toward the stairway, people ran toward the elevators. I set my sights on what seemed to be a protected alcove with a few chairs and a telephone booth. I was hit to one side or the other a few times and spun around once as people rushed passed, but I finally made it to the wall next to the telephone, with a chair between me and the flow of protesters.

I took what felt like my first breath in hours. I wanted to close my eyes. I wanted to put my arms in front of my face and bring my knees to my chin, but instead I scanned the room for a familiar face. I found one behind the information desk in the center of the lobby. Like me, Mr. Flynn had found a safe place to get out of the endless flow of bodies moving through the lobby. A familiar face, but he no longer looked like my teacher. In class he was in charge, and something as small as a raised peace sign was enough to bring things to order. But the Mr. Flynn behind the information desk looked utterly helpless. He was responsible for an entire class of high school students, and he had lost every

last one of them. His head jerked from side to side and his eyes flashed around the room trying to take in every face that passed him, but seeing none of them. And there was something more. There was disappointment. He wanted us to see a protest, wanted us to see Americans exercising their right to be heard. But what we were in now wasn't being heard, wasn't exercising a right. It was creating chaos, and whether Mr. Flynn believed in their cause or not, he didn't approve of what was unfolding around him.

For one crazy second, I thought about crossing the lobby and going to Mr. Flynn. Going to him and telling him that it was OK, that I got it, that I understood that people were upset, that they could disagree, and that they needed a voice. And then she hit me. Or more accurately, she was hit into me.

The police had arrived. I don't know if the police from outside had finally made it up the steps and through the doors or if they had come from inside the building, but suddenly they were everywhere. Until that day, in my mind policemen hid behind billboards waiting for speeders. They wrote parking tickets, and they drove their cars with lights flashing in the Labor Day parade. These police raised clubs and hit anyone within swinging distance. They pushed them into walls and twisted their arms until they fell to the floor. Then they moved on to the next one.

There was a shift. People stopped running up the stairway, and they'd stopped pushing through the doors. Now they were moving in reverse, trying to get out, trying

to get away. But it didn't matter. The police still came, still hit and pushed.

I saw her running. Her long sandy blond hair was flowing out behind her like the flowery dress she wore. She was darting in one direction and then another, desperately trying to get away and not knowing which direction away was. Finally her eyes latched onto a gap in the running bodies or a doorway that looked safe. She had sandals on her feet, but that didn't stop her from running like a track star. My head turned to follow her progress, too afraid to breathe until she was safe. Then I saw the policeman. Saw him, and knew they were on a collision course. If she had been a second sooner, a second faster, she would have been through the doors, and he would have found someone else. I heard myself scream something, telling her to run, or telling the policemen to stop, or just screaming. Screaming. But the full force of his body hit hers and sent her flying.

I watched her in slow motion as she spun toward me, arms and legs pinwheeling. I had time to wish that she'd trip and fall into one of the chairs in front of me, but she only brushed by one of them. Not enough to stop her, only enough to throw her off balance. Another quick stumble and she was beside me. I turned to watch her, putting out an arm to stop or even just slow her down, but too late. Our eyes met as the smooth marble wall stopped her like she hadn't been moving at all. Pain flashed on her face, and she leaned into me. I caught her in my arms, but her momentum was enough to push me to the floor. I sat down

hard, my back against the wall, her head in my lap. Her face was already covered with blood that was slowly making its way into her hair and down her neck. Now that she was up close I saw details that I hadn't noticed during her panicked run. Some of her long hair had been carefully braided with beads placed here and there in a repeating pattern. She wore beaded necklaces as well, one with a polished wooden peace sign, another with a small wooden cross. Her dress had fine embroidery on the edges, and until her own blood had stained it, the pretty flower pattern had been clean and bright.

She was the opposite of the hippie with the megaphone. Maybe she was shaking an angry fist right along with the rest of them, but from the looks of her it was more likely that she had been raising a pleading peace sign. She wasn't much older than I was, maybe in her first or second year of college. It occurred to me that in a few years, I could be just like her. Putting on a nice dress, fixing my hair, and joining my friends to... to what? Get in trouble with the police? No, probably not. I didn't think that the girl had that in mind when she left for City Hall that morning.

I noticed a canvas bag over her shoulder, covered in sewn on patches. Several peace signs of course, one tie dyed, one rainbow. A heart patch, an American flag, a couple that looked like girl scout badges. There was a notebook that had fallen out of the bag. A journal maybe. When I leaned forward to slide it back in the bag, the girl's eyes fluttered and opened. A pretty blue, but with a haze in them like she was

figuring out where she was and trying to remember what happened. When she did, the haze turned to panic and she tried to sit up, but she didn't get far. She winced in pain, clutching my arm weakly with one hand, and then her eyes fluttered closed again.

There was blood. Everywhere.

I remember falling off a swing when I was five or six. I bumped my forehead hard enough to split the skin. Before I could catch my breath, there seemed to be blood all over, running into my eyes, inhaled into my nose when I sniffed in sobs. My father was there instantly, holding me, comforting me, and he finally got me to calm down, explaining to me how even a small cut on the head can bleed a lot. Before I knew it, he'd stopped the bleeding with a handkerchief and a kiss.

With the hippie girl's head in my lap, I tried to remember that, but there was so much blood. Her hair was streaked with it, the top of her dress covered. Even if it was a small cut, it seemed like that much blood would need to be stopped before too long. I shifted her head slightly so it rested on my thighs instead of my hands. I pulled my sweater off, leaving wide smears of red on my shirt. Lifting the girl's head again, I found what seemed to be the source of the bleeding and held the sweater there, hoping to at least slow things down.

I don't know how much time had passed, but when I lifted my head to call for help, the scene in the lobby had changed dramatically. Most of the protesters were gone.

Any that were left were sitting in a small cluster with six or seven policemen standing in a loose circle around them. On the far side of the room, a group of people that were clearly not protesters stood talking among themselves. Mostly business suits, with a few police officers keeping them calm and answering questions. Off to their side was a clump of smaller figures. My classmates, with Mr. Flynn fluttering around them.

No one seemed to have noticed me. I called for help, screamed probably, and I heard my voice echo to the ceiling. Heads snapped in my direction, and two of the closest policemen went from a standstill to a sprint in a blink. Maybe Mr. Flynn had realized he was one student short and was already looking for me, because even though he was on the far side of the room, he was next to me a few steps ahead of the policemen. But the relief on his face turned to panic again when he saw me covered in red.

Police were on radios. They were crouched beside me, lifting the girl, checking me and checking her to figure out who was hurt. Maybe there were people hurt outside as well because paramedics burst through the doors in what felt like seconds. There was a tight circle of faces around me, and then the girl was on a stretcher. She was lifted and carried away, while a paramedic knelt in front of me, asking me questions and shining a light in my eyes. He must have decided I was fine because he was gone as quickly as he came and the corner of the lobby was once again empty except for me and Mr. Flynn.

He started to say something but stopped. He tried a few words again but stopped a second time. Instead he ended up sitting down cross-legged next to me. I moved the bag beside me to make room for him and realized that it belonged to the hippie girl, that it had been left behind when she was carried away. I pulled it toward me, wrapping the strap once around my wrist. Then I leaned my head against the wall behind me and closed my eyes.