

I

A week after Mother's Day, the gray iron cap of City Hall's tower shimmered in a scorching late-morning sun. At the apex, undaunted by the sky's glare, William Penn—in his 37-foot bronze incarnation—gazed toward the distant northeastern point where he had signed his peace treaty with the Turtle Clan of the Lenape.

Meanwhile, far below his feet, a wide mass of humanity stretched to the west, undulating slowly toward a portable stage. Even if Penn could have turned to view the snaking column, it would have seemed trivial from his lofty perspective, in no way a threat to the peaceable, tolerant, "countrie towne" the founding Quaker had envisioned in 1682.

1

NOT ONE MORE!

—a sign hand-lettered in red, white and blue, lifted high above the marcher’s shoulders.

I want to read BOOKS, not EULOGIES
—stark black on white, poked aloft on a wooden cross.

Susie Alioto, a tiny woman packed in by the crowd of marchers on Market Street, strained to see past the welter of signs and banners bouncing around her—what block was this? how much farther to City Hall?—as she proudly hoisted her own handmade contribution, drawn with markers in the anarchist colors of red and black. It aimed straight at the National Rifle Association, which funded the politicians who refused to adopt commonsense gun-control measures. The latest attack in the wave of mass shootings across the country—16 dead, 19 wounded at a high school in the Midwest—had prompted this outpouring into the streets of Philadelphia, semi-coordinated with demonstrations in other cities.

KIDS’ BLOOD on YOUR HANDS, NRA!!!!

read Susie’s sign, the “blood” red and drippy, the “NRA” a shadowed, ominous black with the outline of a semiautomatic rifle behind it. A longtime teacher as well as activist, Susie knew the value of dramatic presentation.

Through her own local group, TeachPeace, which had helped organize this “Disarm Hate” rally, she’d heard that some Second Amendment supporters—gun rights *nuts*, in her view—planned a countermarch, but so far there was no sign of them, and the only police she’d seen had been calm and cheerful. Though Susie’s plans to link up with her friend Margaret had gone awry because of a confusing text message, she didn’t mind marching alone. At 66, she was long used to acting on her own when necessary.

As the march progressed, the office buildings grew denser and higher, looming over the wide street, but they failed to block the unseasonably hot sun that bore down on the demonstrators of all ages and colors and ethnicities: two woman in hijabs in front of Susie; a high-stepping, tanned, bearded man in khaki shorts and sandals, carrying his little daughter on his shoulders; an Asian man with a portrait of Gandhi on his T-shirt; a teenage white girl in blue shorts and a yellow halter top marching arm in arm with a Black girl in bright orange who would have been Susie’s height except for six inches of magnificent Afro. Susie herself wore tan cargo pants and a blue TeachPeace T-shirt.

A chant rippled from the front until everyone joined in, repeating the lines over and over in hypnotic rhythm:

The People, United,
Will Never Be Divided

Dah-DUM-dah, Dah-DUM-dah—the pulse of the crowd lifted Susie, its energy combining with her own outrage at the forces that sacrificed children on the altar of firepower. In the cluster of marchers near her, Susie’s was the loudest voice, and she pumped her sign in time with the chant.

Yet the close-packed bodies added to the oppressive heat, and Susie began to feel lightheaded, as if her marching feet down there belonged to someone else. Though she kept her hair in a short, minimum-maintenance cut, clammy gray strands had plastered across her forehead. She’d remembered to wear sunscreen—her olive Italian complexion had paled with the years—but the greasy coating on her cheeks and neck coagulated the sweat. Afraid of stumbling on someone else’s feet, she stared at the heels of the bearded man to gauge their distance and simultaneously cursed herself for her weakness.

She’d had a similar sensation, bordering on vertigo, three days ago at her son Eric’s college graduation on the Main Line, where the students’ relatives had to sit in long rows on an unshaded lawn while the dignitaries enjoyed the shade of the administration building’s classical portico. That kind of insensitive elitism had always enraged her, and it was part of what she was protesting here—the stupid arrogance of rich and safe politicians who offered “thoughts and prayers” but no action. So what was wrong with her, wobbling after walking a mere six blocks with a cardboard sign on a lightweight stick?

Susie had more vitality than most people half her age, and a health problem was unusual for her. She took deep, careful breaths, fanned herself with her free hand, brought her sign down to shoulder level to ease her arm. She reminded herself that at the graduation, after that moment of dizziness when she stood up to snap a picture of Eric receiving his diploma, she’d recovered quickly. It was just the heat, for sure.

The marchers slowed, then stopped, except for miscellaneous shuffles and regroupings. The front must have reached City Hall, for between the heads and shoulders Susie glimpsed a makeshift stage, and now a megaphone boomed with another chant:

Hey HEY, ho HO,
The NRA has got to GO

The new thrum of energy gave her a boost, and as she raised her voice she turned to check the signs behind her:

Ban the Piece, Build the Peace
Children or Guns—Why is this even a question?
Even Grandma Is PISSED OFF!!!!

Fuck All Your Guns

The last slogan was lettered over the image of a pistol pointing upward, its barrel morphing into a fat middle finger. Susie appreciated the clever illustration but worried that obscenity played into the hands of the movement's critics.

The crowd jammed the entire pavement between the street-level businesses, mostly law offices, banks, investment houses, accounting firms. To the right, over the sidewalk, she glimpsed the double-interlocking-G logo of GentleGrounds, a small local chain of coffee shops. The logo caught her notice because Eric was starting work for the company on Monday, to earn some cash before he left for grad school on the West Coast. He'd mentioned the shop on Market Street, but she hadn't realized it was in this block, at the base of a fancy office tower. Good for GG, thought Susie—snatching a spot that would normally go to a megacorp like Starbucks.

Then she got caught up in the next echoing chant—

Protect Our Kids

Not Your Guns

—and she thrust her sign high again, bouncing on the balls of her feet while her voice, honed by years in a high school classroom, boomed forth.

As the rhythm died away, the megaphone began to introduce the first speaker, a city councilwoman known for her fiery progressivism. Susie struggled to make out the words through the electronic blur and the commotion of the crowd, which seemed suddenly louder. People around her were jostling, and she pulled her sign down tight against her side as protection against shoulders and elbows. The crowd smelled like what it was, a mass of vibrating, sweaty bodies recently dosed with sunscreen, coffee and scrambled egg.

Then another bullhorn broke in, a more metallic sound, competing with the first voice—

More GUNS

Less CRIME

—and a few people near Susie began to repeat the chant until they realized it was the opposite of what they believed. Shit, that must be the gun rights counterprotesters. Where were they—in front, off to the left? Why weren't the police keeping them away?

The commotion grew as people yelled back in anger. The second amplified voice responded,

An Armed Man Is a Citizen

An Unarmed Man Is a Slave

The first voice uttered instruction: "People, stay calm, they're trying to disrupt us. Officers, officers! We have a permit, they do not! Please control them. Do

not let them come up here! Do not let them up here!”

Cheers rang out from the front, and a multitude of shouts—what was happening? Then Susie was knocked in the back. Stumbling, she saw a figure with raised fist fly past her. Clad in tight black pants and T-shirt, with a black hoodie and ski mask, the runner yelled something unintelligible. To Susie’s right, another similarly clad person dashed through the crowd, waving a dark object and screaming imprecations against fascists.

These runners looked like Antifa, the Black Bloc, the loosely organized groups famous for direct action in the name of antifascism. Were they heading up front to confront the gun nuts? But that bewildered Susie—why would they show up here? Many of the people she’d met who claimed to be Antifa had no objection to guns per se, feeling they were necessary to fight the evil of white supremacists and other fascists.

Already she was being shoved side to side as ripples spread through the crowd, and she feared worse to come. Using her experience in such situations, she slipped to the right, out of the middle of things. Gaining the sidewalk, she pressed herself against the eight-foot-high window of the GentleGrounds store, where the sun reflected blindingly as she propped her sign in the doorway. This being a Sunday, the store was closed, as were the law firms and bank offices it served.

More shouts up front, angrier, and more amplified blasts, including what seemed to be an official voice, a cop maybe, but there was so much noise it was impossible to know what was happening. The crowd surged forward and back; signs knocked against people’s heads; a child fell down and was quickly snatched up by its mother. One of the black-clad sprinters sped back from the front, heading straight at Susie before swerving at the last moment. The slim figure swung something—hammer? tire iron? crowbar?—three, four times at different angles, and the coffee shop’s huge window erupted into shards, falling both inward and outward. One splinter clipped Susie’s head. A deafening siren rang, and somewhere beneath that clamor a woman’s voice wailed.

“Idiot!” Susie tried to holler, but her vocal cords didn’t work and the figure was already gone, and when she put her hand to her left ear it came away bloody.

Dizziness hit again as the sun smashed her face. It was time to get out of here. She’d reclaim her sign ... no, too much glass in the way, she’d leave the sign and scoot back along the walls to the first side street ... whoops, she was tilting—needed to stop a minute, how bad was the bleeding? Now she *smelled* it too, the blood.... OW, OW—a knock in the side, crowds are so stupid when they turn into a mob....

She was suffocating, she thought, couldn't catch her breath. She tottered, reached for the wall. She fell.

* * *

"Get up, get up!" a voice ordered.

Susie opened her eyes. Had she passed out? For how long? "Lady, hey, hey, come on, the cops are grabbin' people, you don't wanna stay here."

Blocking the sun, a black-hooded head swam over her.

"You're bleeding?!" It was a young woman's voice. "Was it the— Fuck. We've gotta move—they're shutting it down, squads're gonna sweep the street. Lemme see that—over here, turn your head. The fascists try to take over and they'll blame it on us. Just the ear I think but it's bleedin' like fuck. Gimme your arm, can you sit up? That's it, watch your hand, there's glass all over. Wait, I've got something for that."

Slipping off her slim backpack, she pulled out a hunk of gauze and some adhesive tape. "Be prepared, Sean says. Like a joke on the Boy Scout motto?" With quick hands she fashioned a rough bandage for Susie's ear, then yanked the older woman to her feet. "Put your hand here, keep pressure on it, can you do that? ... You can walk, can't you?"

Space opened on the street as people hustled back the way the march had come. Miscellaneous voices were yelling. "Disperse quietly," a bullhorn boomed. "People, go home now. There are injuries, we need the street clear for the EMTs."

"Bringing in the paddy wagons, that's what," Susie's companion said, pulling her along. "We saw them lined up on Filbert. They don't give a flying fuck about injuries."

After stumbling at first, Susie was picking up speed, one hand pressed on the bandage, the other arm linked in the young woman's. But her brain floated far above, and it amazed her that her feet and all those other parts down there continued to function when disconnected.

Once they turned a corner, Susie's guide whipped off her black ski mask and hoodie, revealing a white T-shirt and a sheaf of dark hair that fell around her face. She slipped both items of disguise into her backpack. "If anyone asks, you're my mom, we got caught up in the crowd by accident and we're taking you home."

They bore north on 16th Street, and within half a block the congestion dissolved. The noise dwindled behind them. At Race Street the young woman wanted to turn, but Susie shook her arm loose and stopped. This didn't seem

right—who was this girl?

“Wait. Where are you pulling me?”

“To my apartment. Few blocks more. Gotta fix that wound. I’m in nursing school, I’ve got antiseptic and stuff.”

Cold sweat chilled Susie’s back. Smears of blood stained her T-shirt. “I can get a taxi home,” she said uncertainly, “take care of it myself.”

“Taxis won’t get through right now. For shit sake, let me help. I saw you when that window busted, thought you were okay, then I circled back and you’re on the ground.”

“Oh.” Susie tried to focus. “You broke the window?”

“No! Not me, no.... I saw it, that’s all. Some bank windows got hit too.”

Steadier now, head reconnecting to her torso, Susie looked up at her rescuer. Tallish, white, with large eyes in a narrow face, a slim athletic body good for pushing through crowds and swinging hammers. About the same age as Susie’s son, early twenties.

Though still doubtful, Susie noticed that her ear was throbbing. Antiseptic made sense. Hard to tell how much blood she’d lost; best to have someone look at it.

Her companion was using the pause to check her phone, rapping her fingers on it in impatience. “Where the fuck did he go?” she muttered to herself.

“If I’m your mother,” Susie hesitated, “I suppose I should know your name.”

“Oh. Yeah, okay. Lauren. That’s my real name, actually, not my pseudonym.”

“Susie’s mine. Also not a pseudonym.”