

Personal Narrative of events that took place in Kent, Ohio between April 30, 1970 and May 4, 1970 as recorded by Lois Van Buren in her memoir, *In the Pillared Dark*.

*“Thursday night, April 30, 1970: In the middle of the film festival that had been going on all week, an announcer interrupted from the projection area above us and said, 'Nixon has sent troops into Cambodia.' I thought it was a part of the show. I thought it was a joke. Then I realized it was for real, and my feelings changed immediately from playful to shock and hurt. This is interesting because, just the other night, something was on the radio about how every American remembers where he was and how he was affected by the announcement that Kennedy had been shot. I remember seeing stunned teachers and crying girls in the hall, but it had no emotional effect on me whatsoever. I remember walking out of the building (school got let out), not knowing whether to be proud of myself for that or ashamed. I was thirteen. Here, at twenty, I was emotionally involved in politics and in the ownership of my country – my country. Something like Nixon going into Cambodia, a decision of such magnitude, was a shock to me. It depressed me to a great extent.*

*The atmosphere of the auditorium where the movies were shown had been quite the party. We were acting like kids, throwing popcorn and paper airplanes, hissing and booing, applauding, shouting out comments and laughing out loud. "Bambi Meets Godzilla" showed. It was a huge hit. I remember it so well; it's a classic. It sent our already high spirits over the top, but when the announcement was made, the movie projector was turned off. I'm not certain of that, but I know I went home and went to bed, and the next morning got up and went down to The Hub, the place where everybody hung out on campus. I was still depressed about this latest news of the war. I ran into a professor, a young woman professor, and I said, 'What are we going to do?' She said, 'You can start by handing these out.' She handed me a single sheet of paper – a declaration of how some professors on campus opposed entering into Cambodia, and how they were going to bury the U.S. Constitution on the commons, near the Victory Bell, at noon. This was Friday.*

*I felt like – 'Well, I'm doing something.' I talked to her for a while and took the stack of paper, and – oh, she said to me, 'You know, something else you can do to influence people about what's going on in this country is to play your music loud so they hear it. Play it so people can hear the words. Maybe they'll listen and understand what's happening.' I passed the flyers to a bunch of people and even slipped one under the dorm mother's door. I really liked the Jefferson*

*Airplane album "Volunteers" so when I got back to the room, I put it on and played it loud: 'If you smile at me, you know I will understand, cuz that is something everybody, everywhere does in the same language.'*

*At noon – this would have still been Friday, May 1st, I – I went over to the commons to see the burying of the Constitution. There was a speech or two, crowds of people, and that was that. The day went on. I don't remember what happened. I didn't go to any classes if I had any.*

*The next thing I remember is being with my friend, Javier, in his room, his dorm room, and asking him if I could do some LSD. Javier had been a little rich kid in Cuba, chauffeured to school, apparently. His parents weren't keen on Castro's world view. They ended up living in Miami, bitter; trying to maintain their culture, wishing they were back in Cuba – minus Castro. Javier promised me he'd make me some fried bananas some day. Anyway, I told him that I wanted to try LSD, so he gave me a hit. I took it and then sat on the bed for a while. He wanted to know if I was coming on. I didn't know what to look for or what was supposed to happen. He told me to look up at the fluorescent light. Then he said, 'Is there anything different?' I looked up at the lights. Again he said, 'Is there anything different?' I said, 'Yes, I see rainbow colors coming from the fluorescent light.' He said, 'Yeah, well, you're starting to come on.'*

*After a while, we went out – over to the apartment of a guy we knew. Gosh, I'm seeing all these people and streets and places run through my mind, but I can't remember the names of any of them. It was this one guy. I never got his name. I know he was blond and wanted to go into law, and I was attracted to him. He had an apartment with this other guy. It was an upstairs apartment in one of those big, old houses that get split up into rooms for students. There were a bunch of people up there, and – I don't know. It was my first trip, so I don't know what everybody else was doing, but Vincent was there. That I know. It was possibly the first time we met.*

*Well, the trip was real good for me. I went through a lot of emotional turnover. At one point, I was crying – a happy crying, when you're feeling the fullness of life and all that jazz, very wet tears as I recall. The guys thought that – I had no idea what a bad trip was – and these guys thought that I was having a bad trip. They were concerned about me. I reassured them, 'Oh, no. I'm just happy.'*

*Farther along in the evening, the blond guy – he must've gone out at some point – ran up the stairs calling, 'The revolution's started! The revolution's started!' We had been talking about*

*the injustices we felt were going on. We were talking the way rebels might, so when he came up the stairs hollering like that, I thought, what's this? It can't be. Everybody was excited, so we went down to see what was going on.*

*As we were walking to town, Vincent picked a hedge flower and handed it to me. I watched it, and it changed a multitude of times. I hallucinated that flower to be many flowers. I remember that vividly – its changing shape, changing color. It was nighttime dark, but I could see the changes and the colors clearly as we walked. We got downtown, heading for a bar.*

*The majority of the crowd had gone into Kent to raise some Cain. There was a lot of running and yelling and whatnot, and the cops were out. We didn't stick around because we were so high on drugs. So here my first trip on acid was also the first night of riots at Kent State – going out into the streets and experiencing, not being involved, but experiencing through observation, things that had a great impact on me, on all of us. That's how my weekend at Kent started. I don't remember much because I was tripping so strong, except that the hills on the way back to campus were velvety green like painted lawns.*

*Well, we – there were four or five of us, girls and guys – stayed up all night. Early, very early, Saturday morning, we saw a guy in uniform running with a cup of coffee in his hand. We followed him and hid down low behind a hill. We then crawled over the rise and saw what looked like an encampment. We couldn't believe our eyes. We felt special that we were the first to find them out, like we were in a juicy spy novel, and we were the spies. We also felt indignant in our rebel righteousness.*

*That was the first evidence of military presence in town because of what had happened the night before. I don't think riots had gone on, but apparently what did happen prompted the military to be called out. There may have been windows broken. Remember, I was in a psychedelic world of my own and made sure to stay on the fringe.*

*I must've slept during the day on Saturday because I don't remember much. The campus was in, oh, turmoil's not the right word. Everybody was kind of anxiously hanging out to see what was going to happen. Jerry Rubin had spoken the week or a couple of weeks before. He was a well known radical back then. I didn't understand why he would want to come to a party school like Kent, but he did. He spoke outside. I remember the image of him – fist in the air. He was perturbed with the United States government. My friends and I were talking about the coincidence of him*

*being there so recently. The black kids, if I've got this right, had a rally of their own going on on Friday, but when all this happened with Nixon escalating the war and everybody grouping up and having something to say about it, they decided they were going to stay out. They were a strong community, and the black student leaders elected to stay out of the whole business. Let the white kids deal with this. It was their world that had created this mess. That was the word passed around, and we respected it. As far as I know, that's what happened. OK, so I must've slept for a while.*

*Late Saturday afternoon, I heard rumors that there was going to be another gathering. I don't remember if these things were planned. I don't think they were. It was just a group of people. We didn't know what we were going to do. We were a bunch of students saying, 'Hey, we don't like what's going on.' We gathered on the commons. The ROTC building was in eyeshot, and somebody got the bright idea to burn it down. We thought that would be kind of fun, so a bunch of us started to do that. There were varied attempts that didn't work. There was a motorcycle parked near the building, and a couple of us thought, 'Well, gee, you know, we could siphon some gas out of that tank and splatter it all over the building. That would help get it started.'*

*Nothing was working, but the fire department came out. Somebody must have called them. The National Guard were still not showing their faces, but the fire department came out and tried to put the fire out that was barely started, if that. I don't remember any flames. We cut, tried hard to cut, the fire hoses. It's pretty tough stuff. I believe we pulled off some slashes and slices. It was definitely one group against the other. Students and firemen.*

*There was an older woman who – maybe she knew more than we did – was very upset because of what was going on. Maybe she had been in some protests. Maybe she knew the possible consequences. There was a photographer. I don't know who or where he was from, but his camera was bigger than a Brownie. He was trying to take pictures of what we were doing when some of the students put him down, struggled with him for the camera, got him to the ground and took it. I don't know if anyone hit him or not, but the older woman was very upset. She kept calling out, 'Let's keep it calm. Let's keep it calm.' I remember seeing the pain in her face and the concern, and this affected me. You have to realize I was only twenty and had never experienced any sort of violence before. I was still innocent to all these sorts of things.*

*Well, we kept trying to cut the fire hose. There was a long line of people all holding on to it, trying to do something with it – keep it from the firemen, anything to disturb their efforts. It was*

*heavy; we were clumsy, and our efforts didn't seem to be panning out, and the idea was dropped. The building still hadn't started burning, so the crowd decided to go downtown and march. Whoever had the loudest voice and was the most aggressive person could get the crowd to do what the crowd did. I remember the mass of people following the person who could yell the loudest. A friend of mine said, 'Well, while everybody's attention is on this crowd downtown marching, why don't we stay back and get this building going? This'll, you know, let 'em know we mean business.'*

*We snuck up onto the hill above the building to get a look at what we could do without being seen. There was a big trash can, a dumpster, that we could see looking down from the hill – not far from the ROTC building. We figured we could get the trash in that going with a rag soaked in gasoline from the motorcycle, and then push it into the building to see if that would do the job. I don't know if I helped push or if we watched a few others do it, or if the whole thing was an idea of ours that was never implemented. All I know is that a few hours later, the building was ablaze.*

*During those hours, we must've gone downtown because I remember returning to the hill to find the burning building, and because I remember seeing people looting parking meters on the sidelines of a marching crowd I was part of. This was wrong, and I knew it would not help our cause. A guy Cory and I knew from the dorm who had literally starved himself to get out of the draft was one of the leaders. We were worried for him. He was reacting to the – I'm sure he had to go through a lot of real struggle to starve himself to keep out of the draft, so he hated the government, and he was getting back at them by leading this crowd of people downtown, creating a path of destruction as he went. Where have I seen words, something like – 'riding high on a sea of people'? It was like that. You had no choice but to move with it.*

*There were some cars that found themselves there with us, in the wrong place at the wrong time, you might say. They were in the street with us as we marched along. One was close to me, to my left, with a family in it. I caught the mom's eye, and she hurriedly locked her door and had her kids do the same thing in the back seat. I was shocked at the fear on her face. I would not hurt her. How could she think that I would hurt her? We were both Americans. Then I saw Charlotte and Estelle watching me as the crowd marched by them, urging me on with big 'Right on, girl!' smiles on their faces. Estelle had an Afro. I gave a big smile back and a peace sign. They shouted some encouragement, and I knew everything was all right between us.*

*Then I remember standing on the hill. It was night now, and the ROTC building was in full*

*blaze. It was really a pretty sight, the fire itself. It was like a big bonfire, but nobody brought marshmallows. We all stood there and watched. There was a tree that had caught on fire nearby. Cory and I tried to put it out kind of heroically. People didn't pay much attention to us. They didn't care about the tree. I remember that. So we watched the building burn. I think the tree fire burned out soon on its own.*

*By this time, we were under martial law. There were posters stating this, saying that the campus and the town were both under martial law. You couldn't stay out after a certain time, and you couldn't form in groups. I don't know what other restrictions - nobody paid attention to them. Also, we - whoever 'we' were - I remember the feeling of having student representatives, but I couldn't tell you a thing about them. We were trying to get Governor Rhodes and the president of the school - I forget his name - to negotiate, but I don't know what the goals were. I don't know if it was to get Nixon back out of Cambodia, or what.*

*Everybody, both 'sides,' were mesmerized by the ROTC building fire. After it was not more than a pile of burnt shambles, we were herded back to the dorms. A crowd of us got caught in The Pit, the central area of one of the dorm complexes. We ended up staying there because we weren't allowed to leave. It was a situation that paranoia is made of; it was jammed full, but instead of freaking out, it turned into a party with music - guitars and percussion and all. It was fun, and it was scary.*

*I slept in Javier's room Saturday night. Whether it was part of the dorm complex we got stuck in, or we were finally allowed out to go to bed, I don't recall. All night long, helicopters flew very close. They shined their searchlights in all the dorm windows and kept shining them in all night long, keeping us awake with the lights and the loudness of the helicopters. We really thought we were at war, but it was a toy war. It was fun and games to us, but obviously not to them. We didn't realize that it wasn't Cowboys and Indians. That's the unfortunate part.*

*Sunday morning, I think it was, a parade of Army tanks and - tanks! - Army tanks, Army trucks, a convoy going slowly down the main street outside of Javier's window, parading past Kent Hall - to show their strength, I guess. It must be what the military has to do so that you see they are there. We were calling it the Boy Scout Jamboree, but it was no Boy Scout Jamboree. It was the National Guard in town, taking over.*

*Sunday was pretty quiet. I remember getting tear-gassed over the weekend, but it was so chaotic that I'm having trouble separating which time was which. All of the running on campus*

*took place in the same area: the commons, the hill above it, and some open field that must've been right there. I remember running, feeling chased, and getting gassed by vapors. Some people said it was pepper gas. I helped put Vaseline under people's noses so it wouldn't burn so much, and I carried a supply of wet rags to hold over our noses. I remember running. People right next to me – all around me – running. Running. It was possibly on Saturday night, we literally stampeded a fence down because we were surrounded by 'them' – police, firemen, National Guard? Who knows? 'Them' – on three sides. Our only way out was on the fourth side, which was the fence. I experienced . . . group paranoia. When we saw we were in jeopardy, and the only way out without fighting was through this fence – well, we stampeded it down. It was a cyclone fence, too.*

*May 3rd, 1970*

*There were supposed to be negotiations on Sunday afternoon in the main – in Kent Hall, I think – on the front campus. We hung out, very calmly. Everybody waited to see what was going to happen in those meetings, but I don't think anything did. I spoke with a couple of the National Guard. They were from Akron, which is only ten miles from Kent. They were also college students, same age, or a few years older. I put flowers in the muzzle of the rifle of one of them. We flirted. He was cute. I remember being impressed with the fact that he was as young and naive as I was, and that he was just doing what he thought was right, like kids doing what their parents tell them to do. He didn't know, I don't think. I don't believe he really knew that guns kill. Not really.*

*In the evening, a large group of us ended up at a central intersection downtown or near the entrance to the campus, maybe. We were having a sit-in. We sat and waited for the governor or mayor or some official to come and talk to us. Nobody ever did. After a while, it seemed to be a ploy to keep everybody in that one place. I wanted to give one of the National Guard some flowers when some friends of mine said, 'No, don't do that. They might think you're going to harm them. You'll be antagonizing them.' A few people had tried to make advances during the weekend and had bayonets shoved at them, so I'm glad I heeded the warning.*

*We were all sitting in the street there – right in the middle, where all the corners met. We sat for what seemed like hours. Again, we were waiting and waiting and waiting, and nothing happened. Later – it was night now, I was sitting cross-legged, and as I looked around, I started noticing there were National Guardsmen all around us, at the back edges of the scene. So they were doing it again. Ah, I see. I remember this feeling of them doing it again, so the fence thing*

*must've happened on Saturday. They were surrounding us very quietly. When I noticed this, I mentioned it to somebody, and I guess a few others were noticing it, too. We freaked and ran. Everybody took off. Mayhem again.*

*Now for Monday: there was another speech and rally scheduled on campus despite the injunction. I don't know what the demands were. I don't remember. I don't know what we expected to have come out of this or how we were planning to end it. It ended itself, of course.*

*I went down to the commons to hear the speeches and people speaking their mind, when all of a sudden, we were running again. Again. There had been fireworks going throughout the weekend, and we were getting so used to tear gas that this is what I was expecting – another repeat – but I heard some pinging, and I felt some whooshing go by my head. I looked to the left and saw a car window shatter. I looked to the right and saw a person fall. Then someone yelled, 'They're shooting. Get down!' I felt something in my leg and dove under a bush. Then there was silence.*

*My initial reaction was panic. I wanted to find Corrine, who was my loved one. I wanted to find Cory. I wanted the security of another loved one with me. I was calling for her. She was calling for me. Everybody was calling for friends. I was wringing the heck out of the rag I'd been using all weekend to protect my lungs. I was wringing it out of nervousness. I was in a rage. I learned what rage is. In those few seconds, I was totally stripped of everything I had believed in. I wanted to blindly shoot anybody who was behind me because behind me was where Nixon was, where the National Guard was, where my country was and I hated them. I experienced pure hate. I experienced the ability to kill. I could have killed if I'd had a gun in my hand. There's a chance that I would have been – I WOULD HAVE BEEN shooting blindly. I turned and stared in the direction of the onslaught. The only thing I remember seeing at that moment was the movie screen of my mind. It blocked out everything my eyes might have been looking at, and on it was a movie of me in third or fourth grade, with all of my classmates, standing and reciting the flag salute. It's a moment that stands by itself. Everything else stopped. This place that had brought me up and that was supposed to be mine, on my side, that I was a part of, turned and said, 'No, you are not a part of us. You're against us, and we have to shoot you down.' Everything I believed in was scourged from me. I can't think of the word. Scoured. Scorched. I think I mean that – scorched. Fire and harshness and scrubbed – ripped out clean. Some combination of that.*

*These were the immediate minutes right after it happened, and although people were crying*



*and yelling and calling to each other, there was a strange silence throughout the whole area.*

*I watched one of the four die. I didn't realize what was happening. There were some people stooping over her body. I remember a guy taking his hand and wiping out her mouth. I remember seeing some guts or flesh or something pink and white like that fling from his hand. Maybe she had vomited. I don't know what it was. He tried to give her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Her shirt – T-shirt – was not all the way covering her body, so her stomach was exposed halfway. I was watching her stomach. It was not a person I was watching. It was a biological entity. It was a body. It was a stomach trying to keep its life. She was pumping very hard to breathe, or maybe that was him pumping his breath into her. I don't know. I don't think so, but I remember the impression that this was not a person. It was a biological thing trying very hard to stay alive, and somehow that biology was her essence, her soul, and was the part I didn't want to see end. But it didn't work. The guy lifted his head and said, 'She's gone.' My first inclination was that she'd fainted. Then I realized, 'No, she's dead.' It was the first dead person, other than people at viewings, that I had ever seen. Have ever seen. It left a heavy burden on me.*

*I watched a friend of mine named Scott taken away on a stretcher. He had been shot in the neck. A number of us had been calling to some flaky girls watching from second-story windows. We were shouting to them to call the ambulances, but I guess they were too afraid to help us. It's hard to realize that we were the enemy. We were foreigners to them. I couldn't grasp the fact that they didn't realize I was an American, and I was part of them. That was real hard for me to compute.*

*Come to find out, I had been injured somehow – shot in the leg, a ricocheted bullet or something. Maybe a stone kicked up or a bullet skimmed my leg. I'll never know. I was in shock and it had to be pointed out to me. A guy came up from behind and said, 'Hey, you've got blood soaking through your pants.' We looked and a glob of blood spilled over my boot when we pulled the pant leg up. He helped me get to a bathroom to wash it. I was wearing cowboy boots, square-toed Frye's. He said he saw I was limping and came over to give me a hand when he saw the blood. We washed the wound, but it became infected, and I had a scar from that for a while.*

*Well, those of us left behind after the ambulances drove off tried to have some kind of civil talk-it-out, but it was no use. We disbanded. It didn't last very long. We gave up. I went back to the dorm. An all-points type bulletin went out stating something to the effect of, 'Everybody must leave campus. The campus is closed. Everybody go home; take only as many belongings as you can carry. Don't go into town. You'll be contacted over the summer.' We were then instructed which*

*route to leave campus by. Nobody wanted another shooting to take place, so everybody followed orders. Cars were packed with people. Cory and I got a ride. I remember I had an Acme bag full of clothes, and so did she. It was a real scene. We got out of town a few miles in this crowded car, and then we hitched the rest of the way home to New Jersey. That was it for the year at Kent. Exams were sent through the mail. Grading was done through the mail. And, of course, it made the national news.*

*In the aftermath of the shootings, many of us spoke at various colleges and universities around the country. I was asked to speak at Douglass College, the girls' part of Rutgers. It was a real fiasco – a humiliating experience for me. Because of what happened at Kent, other schools were marching and protesting and doing their thing and having different people speak, so I went and spoke at this school. It was quite a crowd of people who came to listen. I'd say the hall held 400. They were overflowing into the aisles and out past the exit, which made the place abuzz with people. I didn't have anything prepared. I didn't know what to prepare. I was told to just go up there and talk about what happened.*

*I got booed, literally booed. Hissed at and booed. It was a horrible experience. I cried. I was telling them my impressions of what happened. I was telling them about all the drugs that were in town and that most of the people I knew Friday night were on drugs. Like I said, this was my first LSD experience, so it was very much a part of the whole thing for me. But they booed me. I was just telling them what I saw. Me, not anybody else. They were trying to ask me these stupid news commentator questions, and I was totally humiliated. I think I got about halfway through my impressions of the weekend when I couldn't stand it anymore, so I went back to my seat on stage and sat there and sobbed. They didn't like what I had to say.*

*While I was sobbing, some girl went up to the podium and tried to head up a bumper sticker committee. I thought this was really ghastly. It made me very cynical; I felt like jumping down her throat for that. Here they were, booing me – all 400 or how many the hell it was – for telling them what happened to me as I saw it, and they were trying, in their snootiness to what they felt they knew, to get a goddamn bumper sticker committee together. What good were bumper stickers going to do? They thought they knew what went on. As if they were the ones that were there, and I wasn't. Well, I was there, and they didn't want to hear what I had to say, so they booed me back to my seat. A friend who had accompanied me to New Brunswick was in the wings. She got my attention and*

*shushed me off the stage when she saw I was so humiliated and crying. I really cried when I got off the stage. She told me later that the audience felt sorry for me and gave me a standing ovation. That made me want to puke. They should've realized that I was there. At the shootings. And that I was emotionally involved.*

*For many years afterward, it was uncomfortable to talk about, and whenever I did, it took a day or two to recover. If the memory of that one isolated weekend could rattle me like that, how can a soldier go to war? How dare we send him?"*

Respectfully submitted,

Lois Van Buren

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