"In pursuit of the best impulses of his generation, Haldane followed his heart through the outermost extremes of our culture and times, lost it (and his soul) and found them again! The story is unflinching, wildly improbable and pretty scary in spots."
– Ken Borgers, *Audible.com*

NAZIS & NUDISTS

DAVID HALDANE

That sounded just fine to me. And so I made my way to what seemed like the burgeoning capitol of that parallel universe: Berkeley, California.

The place was a cauldron of delicious subversion. I parked myself in a boarding house just off Telegraph Avenue where the entire circus was on parade. Then set out for the offices of the *Berkeley BARB*. In truth, I'd never been to a real newsroom before. But someone had said that the paper needed layout artists, and I'd done a little of that for the college paper back at Goddard. So I threw some samples into a backpack and set off across town.

The *BARB* didn't look like much by 1973. The front of the place lay plastered under hundreds of dried posters slapped atop each other like layers of ageing tree bark chronicling the history of the time. A pair of them caught my eye: one bore the familiar visage of Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara, then still venerated by many in Berkeley, set off by the slogan *Venceromos* – "We Shall Triumph!" Half covering it, though, was a newer poster, this one adorned by the face of a plump dark-skinned young boy and the words "Who is Maraj-Ji?" I sucked in my breath and opened the door.

Max Scherr was still editor in those days, and the inside of the place looked pretty much like the outside. The old man occupied a back corner of the room, facing the wall at a desk piled high with books, papers, unopened letters and yellowed issues of the *BARB*. "Whadaya want?" he said without turning around. He seemed to be scribbling rapidly on the back of an envelope atop all that crud.

"Hi, uh, I'm David Haldane. I was wondering whether you need any help."

Only then did he look over his shoulder, staring at me thoughtfully through piercing brown eyes. They peaked out from behind an enormous grey-black beard topped by long scraggly hair of the same color. He wore a cap, riding on his sea of hair like a little boat about to capsize. Though seemingly calm, he had the look of a man perfectly

capable of biting off your nose. Max swiveled around in his chair, leaned back and studied me coldly with fingers laced tightly behind his head. "And just how do you think you can help, young man?" he asked.

"I can lay out a page," I said, handing him a sample. As it happened, some of the pieces I'd laid out also bore my byline. Without a word, he began scanning them. "I see that you also can write," Max said suddenly. "Tell you what – I've got an assignment for you." And just like that, my career in journalism began.

The story he had in mind was about a man named Pat McSorely, though neither of us yet knew that name. In fact, most people – if they knew him at all – referred to him simply as the blind beggar of Berkeley, the city's oldest and most persistent panhandler in a town that celebrated that pursuit. At 73, McSorely was a familiar figure on Telegraph Avenue where he spent most days clutching a red-tipped cane in one hand and rattling a tin cup in the other. He'd been at it so long that he'd become a local fixture whose tale, Max felt, should finally be told. And so he sent me out to get it.

"I usually work six or seven hours a day," the old man told me over tacos at La Fiesta, a popular Mexican restaurant in town. "If I'm lucky I can make $1.60; on a really good day maybe twice that. Sometimes things get good and sometimes they slack up, you never can tell."

Then he told me a story almost too perfect to believe. Born in nearby Vallejo, McSorely said, he was one of eleven children of a poor tailor who died when he and he and his siblings were young. But cruel fate intervened even further when a clump of exploding gun powder blinded young Pat in one eye and, a short time later, a careless archer shot out the other. McSorley said he attended a school for the blind for a time but got kicked out for bad behavior. Then he tried making baskets and, failing in that, finally took to the streets.

For two hours he regaled me with stories of his Berkeley life. Some of them were incredible, like the one about the plainclothes

policewoman who invited him to dinner, then handed him the bill. Or the priest who had him arrested. "I don't mind being blind," McSorely concluded, "I'm used to it. I've met thousands of people, most of them good. But, boy, some of them are just damn crooks. Most dogs will treat you better than people, at least they're on the level. I love a good dog."

The story appeared a few days later under the title "Blind Man's Bluff." The morning it came out, I was having coffee at the Renaissance Cafe' when I noticed a complete stranger reading my piece. An unfamiliar, but also quite pleasant, sense of omnipotence and wellbeing swelled up in my bosom. Thus began a lifelong addiction to ink which, in Berkeley, was a gateway to mischief and magic.

For it wasn't just crusty posters proclaiming that God was a fat kid. A few weeks after my arrival, no less a luminary than Rennie Davis blew into town to announce that he too had come to that conclusion. This was big news in Berkeley; Davis had been a staunch antiwar activist, a defendant in the infamous Chicago 7 conspiracy trial following major disruptions at the 1968 Chicago Democratic National Convention, and someone columnist Nicholas von Hoffman had described as "the most stable, the calmest, the most enduring of that group of young people who set out to change America at the beginning of the 1960s." Now here he was, proclaiming that God was an overweight Indian teenager who would usher in the new millennium – a thousand years of "perfect peace" – at a gathering set for Houston in November. The initial reaction was predictable: people threw tomatoes in Zellarbach Auditorium.

After the hubbub subsided, however, Davis returned – this time more quietly – and offered an interview to the *Berkeley BARB*. "Haldane, I think this one's yours," the managing editor, James A. Schreiber, yelled across the newsroom for no particular reason, and off I went.

It was a rainy night and the first time I'd driven my ancient Honda

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Little Boxes

The truth was that I hadn't heard anything either. But in the days that followed I became increasingly cognizant of another truth: that a man hears what he wants to hear, it's just a matter of listening. Rennie Davis had been right about looking into the box. But there were a myriad of boxes in Berkeley and each had an eyepiece focused for a different eye. So you had to keep looking until you found one that appeared sharp to you, one in which you could read the fine print and see clearly the markings on its walls. And you had to listen too, for each box had a voice and each voice sang its own song.

Lord how I'd looked. Lord how I'd listened. It had become a full-time occupation. I did nothing else but spend my days looking into boxes and describing what I saw. One day I looked into a box and saw my mentor, Max Scherr, sitting at the Mediterranean Café on a Friday afternoon. This was the archetypal smoke-filled room where the Berkeley heavies all hung out, but on this day I found Max alone, nursing a beer and looking sad. He motioned me to come over.

A former bar owner himself, Max had started the *BARB* with his longtime companion, Jane Peters, in 1965. The scruffy "underground" paper quickly became the news and communications center for the militant Free Speech Movement then swelling on the Berkeley campus. That role was bolstered in 1969 when the *BARB*'s coverage made international headlines by sparking the infamous battle over People's Park, driving circulation to a startling 90,000 nationwide.

Now, however, things were changing: the political movement had ground its teeth almost flat and the protests were petering out. At about the same time, Max was encountering personal problems: Peters had left him and threatened to assume control.

It was 3 p.m. when I saw him. I had come in from the glare of the day looking for some coffee and a spot of peace after working all morning. Max was sitting at a table hunched over a newspaper and the mug of beer. "Hi Dave," he said without looking up, "working hard?"

"Always," I said, feeling uncomfortable. We sat in silence for a few moments sipping our drinks, Max reading the paper. "How are things with you?" I asked.

He folded the paper carefully on the table. "Hard times," my boss said. "I dunno, Dave, I just feel tired. The paper's dying and there's nothing I can do."

"What are you talking about?" I managed, nonplussed.

He turned his head to look around the room, but the effort proved almost too much; the head seemed heavier than the neck could support. It circled slowly like a top reaching the end of its spin, then toppled sidelong onto the table's surface. With great effort, he raised it again and faced me squarely.

"You weren't around," he said, "so you don't know. In the old days the *BARB* didn't just report the movement, it *created* it. We had good writers then, people who were willing to get out there and work. Hell, we *made* the movement; we weren't just a newspaper, we were *news*."

"And now?" I asked, almost afraid to hear his reply.

"Shit," said Max, waving his index and middle fingers weakly in the air, "nobody wants to do anything now, nothing's happening."

I thought about it for a second before responding. "Max, I don't think the *BARB* has changed as much as times have; things are different now, you can't get around that. The issues have changed, and it's a whole new game."

"Hell it is," said Max. "The issues never change. It's just that we

don't always have the courage and perception to see them clearly. Nothing's changed but us; we're older and more tired."

He took another swig from his mug. "Now we're just like all the others," Max moaned. "I know what needs to be done, dammit, but I don't know anybody willing to do it. I think the seventies is an age of despair."

He swooned then, laid his head on the table and for an instant I thought he would cry. But he didn't; just picked up his head and kept sucking that beer.

In a way I understood how he felt. The times had indeed changed, and Max was definitely old school. Yet there was a kind of schizophrenia in his despair. While Max the ideologue still espoused countercultural political values, Max the businessman had ridden the crest of the change, in some ways even hastening it.

That was especially evident in the *BARB*'s classified advertising section where, as early as 1967, the customer base that had initially supported the paper – primarily head shops and the music industry – began giving way to an extensive, and increasingly prominent, collection of explicit personal sex ads. Eventually about a third of the paper displayed various forms of sexual advertising touting an array of earthly delights including X-rated films, pornographic bookstores, mail order novelties, both gay and straight erotic models, massage therapists and prostitutes of every ilk.

For a time the gratuitous nude photos spilling into the news section made the *BARB* one of the country's top-selling underground newspapers. In the end, though, it alienated the movement's more ideological components – especially feminists – and, perhaps even more significantly, began affecting coverage. So it wasn't surprising that, by 1974, I was writing explicit articles related to the "sexual revolution" regarded by many as a natural extension of the *inner* revolutionary direction the movement had taken.

A two-part series appearing under my byline in February of that

year, for instance, featured a first-person exploration of the latest Bay Area rage – the Nude Encounter – during which generally male subjects paid for the "liberating" experience of engaging in private conversations with naked females. While the phenomenon broke no new ground for me personally, it seemed to have created quite a buzz among readers learning about it for the first time through advertisements in the *Berkeley BARB*. Naturally, the newspaper covered my expenses in personally researching the subject. But the distance from that to actual pornography was not very far.

In time, of course, this trend would prove to be the *BARB*'s undoing. In the early years of Scherr's "age of despair," however, it was potentially – and in some cases *actually* – a source of considerable profit. And so it happened that I got a call from a guy named Goff. "*Jack* Goff," he said, and we were off to the, um.....show.