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Dancing with Ghosts: A Memoir of Tribal War

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If we are to stand a ghost of a chance of surviving the increasingly imminent catastrophe our culture is hurtling toward, we must learn to adapt to new habitats. We must be able to migrate with the seasons, to intermingle with unlikely allies and long lost cousins, to hunt for opportunities to gather momentum as if our lives depended on it. This is a true story about a time when we did some of these things with a measure of success.

We received a spectral smoke signal of nybbles and bytes requesting our presence in the cold plains of Oneida, New York. Not knowing what to expect, our hearty band of improbable and impermissible white wanderers from the flatlands of the South journeyed to the snowy plains of Oneida. Following directions hastily and poorly translated over an obscure pay phone, we came onto a stone longhouse, the home of the Onyota'a:ka, the traditional Oneida of the Standing Stone. We pried open the heavy wooden doors, and peered inside.

A mighty elder, Clanmother Maisie Shenandoah of the Oneida, greeted us with open arms and a broad smile. A powerful woman,

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she had seen generations come and go, and she feared that this would be the last to live in freedom. She explained that this thirty acres land we were now on — and the homes upon it — were the last of the sovereign nation of the Oneida people, subject to no law except their own. This proud people and their land were under assault from without and within (as they still are¹). One of their own had gone to Harvard, gotten himself a business degree, and incorporated the tribe as a corporation, building a financial empire spanning mid-state New York. Oneida Nation Inc. — an independent fiefdom with its own laws, its own taxes, its own courts, its own (mostly white) police, with Judge, Jury, Executioner, God, and State wrapped up in one man: Ray Halbritter.

Known among the locals as “No-Face Ray” for cursing the ways of the Oneida and declaring himself against all sanity and tradition “Chief for Life,” Ray is attempting to develop this pocket of land, the thirty acres of the traditional Oneida, the last remaining sovereign Oneida land. Women have been evicted by Ray’s private “Housing Inspectors,” and seen their houses bulldozed before their children’s very eyes. Shopping malls will soon rise up, following the pattern of twisted and terrible progress familiar to any denizen of Western capitalism and civilization. If you stand on the edge of the thirty acres, you can already see the future — a giant casino, sprawling across the land like a bloated carcass. A call to arms. Soon.

Ray’s private army was patrolling the thirty acres, and we were told that the official explanation for our presence was an invitation to a tribal dance. Dancing it was. One by one, all the Oneida families of the thirty acres piled into the little longhouse, and with them they brought a never-ending procession of all sorts of food

¹Their struggle continues today. To get in touch with the Oneida, contact:

Onyota’a:ka People of the Standing Stone
PO Box 450
Oneida, NY 13421
315-363-2304 (ask for Maisie)
www.oneidasfordemocracy.org

and drink. After a rousing meal, one of the older men stood in the middle of the room and began chanting in a tongue my ears could not comprehend, a sound rich with dignity beyond compare. Children lined up behind his booming bass voice, providing a brilliant treble. Soon the entire room, except for us white folk, was dancing up a storm. They absolutely refused to allow us to remain mere spectators, grabbing us hand in hand until we were all dancing side by side, some of us with considerably less skill than others.

When the dance came to an end, an old man with white hair pulled two of our band off to the side. “Did you bring baseball bats?” he asked. We weren’t sure what he meant, so we said that we were “ready for whatever it took,” an equally coded answer. He then started telling us stories, about bingo parlors burning and Mohawk revolts, about the first winter snow and about Ray’s mother’s facelifts. After considerable mystery, he left us with a simple message: “Gringo Windshield.”

Ray Halbritter was going to enter the thirty acres to hold a meeting of his cronies in an ancient longhouse that he had closed to the community long ago. His private army of goons was to be there to strike fear into the locals’ hearts. In the morning the old man’s words rang true. A small line of us in full black bloc regalia surrounded the larger crowd of traditional Oneida, who were for the first time in years going to contest Ray openly. We prayed that our threadbare patches of anarchy and punk would protect us from bullets. Ray scurried into the longhouse at our approach, and his goons tried to arrest one of our burly black-masked friends. I screamed “Let him go!”

Magic.

Ray’s police did let him go. We were shocked. Since we weren’t Oneida, Ray’s police had no legal right to arrest or even touch us. Bristling with badges, guns and clubs, they just told us to leave. We began laughing in their faces and mocking them. “Police? You aren’t even real police! Come on, just touch me!” “So how does it

feel to beat up women in front of their children for a living?” “Don’t feel so high and mighty now, do you, boy?”

The traditional Oneida were delighted, and began joining in the taunts. Under cover of the commotion outside, they sent their children through the back door of the longhouse. Inside, Ray and the world he represents found themselves an emperor without clothes, as little children ran around in the meeting openly defying him and giggling at his self-important madness. Soon, the commotion got so out of hand that the local city police showed up, along with reporters — an unheard of event in Ray’s territory. The traditional Oneida took the police and reporters aside, showing them their home videos of Ray’s police beating women and destroying their homes. Smiles broke out on all our faces when Ray turned tail and fled. The ice that separated us from the Oneida began to break.

There we stood, two tribes — one ancient and the other new — united against a common enemy. The ancient tribe was fighting for survival, and, unlike our ancestors at Wounded Knee, we turned our backs on allegiance to race, nation, or any other fiction, to join them in arms. This alchemy released magic — police unable to police, children ridiculing kings. The Oneida’s struggle against extinction goes on, as does ours. Let us hope it goes on together, as we realize the possibilities of tribal alliances that can overcome our loneliest moments and the impossible odds. In the end, we are not ghosts from the past, but ghosts of the future. Let us dance — together.

“Here we are, the dead of all time, dying once again, only now with the object of living. You have to get out of yourself to save yourself.”

— masked spokesperson of the black bloc, Chiapas, Mexico