

Intensity In The Tent City

3 a.m. Tuesday morning, and the man in the dirty gray coat shouts that something has gone terribly wrong. "I got stuck with a fucking needle!" he bellows to no one in particular, throngs of people shuffling past him with duct tape armbands stuck to their jackets. "I'm here trying to save this goddamned country and I get stuck with some junkie's fucking dirty needle!"

A woman with a medic's red armband stops beside us. "Are you okay?" she asks him.

"No!" he shouts. "I'm going to get this damn thing shut down!"

"Ha!" a skinny man with glasses says impetuously. "We're Occupy Portland! There's no shutting us down!"

When I first heard that protesters fed up with corporate money and interests influencing politics had set up camp on Wall Street, I was intrigued. As someone who sees far too many of my peers suffering under the current economy, trying in vain to get by despite our best efforts, I resonated with the message that we are the 99 percent struggling beneath the financial control of the country's most powerful 1 percent. So when this occupation expanded nationally, even to the staid parks around Portland's courthouses, I dragged out my tent and sleeping bag to support the movement for a night.

Now, I am sitting on a bench in Chapman Square, watching the man in the dirty gray



remember to breathe

BY NICK MATTOS

coat get diffused by a calm, tired group of volunteer safety patrollers. The Occupy Portland camp exists in a time and space triangulated between ancient Athens, a 1960s political demonstration and a post-apocalyptic refugee camp. Earlier that evening at the consensus-based administrative meeting called General Assembly, a discussion of the tens of thousands in dollars of damages the city estimates the protest to have already done to Chapman and Lonsdale Parks led a girl next to me to snort in laughter. "What would they expect?" she asked, pulling her black hoodie close around her face. "There are over 500 people here! What else could we do?"

I watch the kitchen volunteers hurriedly setting out trays of donated vegetables, rice, beans. As soon as they hit the tables, hungry workers and passersby lunge for them, scoop piles onto donated plates and eat voraciously. A rough-hewn order, borne on the strength of countless hours of volunteer service, keeps the occupation functioning with a thrilling energy of controlled chaos. Groups of young men stride purposefully beneath the tarps. A homeless man walks past me with a hardened stare, spits on the ground.

"What will the revolution come down to?" he snarls at no one in particular before merging back into the sea of people. I sigh as his unanswered question hangs in the air.

Kerry walks over to me, sits down next to a cardboard sign reading, "What country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance?"—Thomas Jefferson."

"How was your dishwashing shift?" I ask.

"Other than getting a little soaked and having to scrape dried hummus off the plates, went pretty good. Getting tired at all?"

"Yes. It's definitely bed time." I yawn, the buzz of activity around us notwithstanding.

Kerry takes a bite out of a crisp apple, reading the sign beside us thoughtfully. "Jefferson was absolutely right," she says between bites. "He asserted that the nation would only succeed if a revolution occurred every 20 years." She hands the apple to me. "We're just hundreds of years overdue."

We walk into Beta Camp, straight into Anarchy Alley. Street kids smoke hand-rolled cigarettes, teenage girls play with skinny kit-

tens, Kerry and I sit on the bench to finish our apple. We are surrounded by confusing noise and barely controlled chaos, the sounds of lighters flicking and drunk people laughing, cars driving down Fourth Avenue, tarps flapping in the wind.

Above us, between the tree branches, I see the immense American flag over the federal courthouse. It flutters languidly in the clear night, poignantly lit up against the dark sky. It strikes me that this fascinating, exciting, often scary camp struggles under the weight of apathy, crime and disorder—often to the extent that the movement's larger aims (as I understand them) are lost in the day-to-day effort to keep this strange little city-within-a-city functioning. This is a microcosm of America at large: We're a nation of idealists with altruistic, forward-thinking, even revolutionary goals, bogged down by the necessity of dealing with urgent social problems, forced to focus so much on putting out the proverbial fires that the "American Dream" loses its coherence.

"What are you laughing about?" Kerry asks me. "Up there. The American flag," I reply, smiling. "You know what? I think here, in the camp, is probably the best view of it we'll ever get." ☐

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