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Almost Terrorists, 1970

*Memories recovered in the War on Terrorism, 2002
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We called ourselves "The Red Coven."

We lived in a shabby Inman Square Cambridge apartment, watched over by a patient Portuguese landlord, down the street from the American Friends Service Committee which protected draft resisters. We were radicals, feminists, anti-imperialists, anti-racists, anti-capitalists.

Andrea was angry at men who hit on her, and at her New Hampshire mother's brain tumor. Maria was mad at Boston cops for beating her at a Northeastern University demonstration, and at the San Francisco fireman father who had battered both her and her mother.

Donna and I were older, more "developed" in our anger at imperialism, and capitalism. She, daughter of Greek immigrants, had even taken a famous Marxist writer for a lover. I loved saying that, "taken for a lover." Like Emma Goldman.

I was a newly transplanted Southerner, Harvard graduate school leaver. Brittle with shame at the racism of the white lower middle class world of my roots, I simmered with slow-burning rage at a mean, social climbing cracker mother.

We planned meetings and demonstrations. We went out at midnight, armed with buckets of homemade paste to "poster" buildings and bridges to announce the next rally to protest the latest injustice. We noticed things, like the warehouse building next door with no signs. Was it a mob storehouse, or a CIA front?

We did NOT sell drugs (retrograde to get arrested for a non-political crime). We did "liberate" books from bookstores, and sometimes groceries from supermarkets. But we did not rip off restaurants anymore, because we found out that waitresses would have to pay back our tab from tip money.

My battered Ford Falcon had bricks in the back, ready to throw at bank and insurance company windows when the cruelties of capitalism overwhelmed us in the middle of the night. Spring 1970 was when they started building banks without windows, and installing unbreakable glass that bounced the bricks right back. We took small credit for their increased expense.

We were most incensed about the white privilege we experienced, even as outlaws in the eyes of America. Cops followed us after we dropped some guys off at the Roxbury Black Panther house. They took us to the station, not because we were co-conspirators, but to warn about "hanging around with black guys."

Four white kids were dead in Ohio. Songs were written, student strikes held -- even the media seemed to care. Soon after, National Guardsmen shot and killed black students at Jackson State College. Nobody noticed, no rallies, no outrage.

The Red Coven noticed. The Red Coven would act.

We would bomb the Commonwealth Avenue National Guard Armory, near B.U. We had it all worked out: toss a bomb from our car that would be stopped for "repairs" on the Mass Pike, which still today almost overhangs the Armory building.

Our statement was ready. We were not nonviolent wimps submitting to legal crimes of the state. We were willing to "call the question." If you were not with the People you were against them.

We had been to the back of the Armory, near the railroad tracks. We walked around, figured out the best place to throw the bomb, argued about the get-away route. We even teased a guard after he asked "why are you here? planning to blow up the place?"

Andrea laughed, swinging her long shiny hair, "No, not worth the trouble. No tactical value, besides, you're too cute."

We read and re-read mimeographed instructions for how to make a bottle bomb. My friend was in the Billerica House of Corrections for "disrupting classes at MIT." When guys left the place he would give them my address, send messages. One tough white townie, a Viet Nam vet, offered to buy the material, to help us with our bomb.

We had it all planned out.

Sunday was scheduled for bomb-making. We all sat around the cramped breakfast table. The guy wasn't there. We were going to meet him later. The morning sun exposed brush marks where we had painted ragged blue scallops along the edge of the ceiling. The stereo played Buffy St. Marie.

We looked at each other. I don't remember who said what first:

"We're crazy. We can't make a bomb. We'll blow ourselves up."

"It's too far to throw. We'll get caught getting off the expressway."

"Too many people will see us. We'll hurt the Movement."

"What were we thinking?"

We never met the guy. He called, I told him we wouldn't do it. It was "bad politics." He didn't push. Maybe he was a government agent, maybe not.

I always wonder what would have happened if we had made that bomb, thrown that amateur weapon at the racist, capitalist, militarist state. If successful, would we have gone underground? Planned more actions against Amerika? Learned to shoot at a desert training camp? Hid in a cave?

It *was* racist then that troops could shoot Southern black college students and no one reacted....but dead white students generated a "national crisis of conscience." Just as it is racist now that four times more black than white babies die in childbirth. Capitalism is still unjust, our democracy deeply flawed, and our foreign policies as murderous as they were then, only now fewer US troops are lost. Even as I am more respectful of why so many immigrants still come

here, I also understand why people hate America enough to "commit cowardly acts of terror," If there were a global "axis of evil," surely it would include the obscenely rich and arrogant U.S.A.

So I know that if our macho revolutionary ex-con had been at that sunny breakfast table thirty years ago, no member of the Red Coven would have dared waiver, no space would have allowed for all-too reasonable doubts.

After all, we were strong. We noticed things. We acted against injustice.

Ann Withorn teaches at U Mass Boston and engages in what acts of opposition she is still able to perform. She changed the names of her fellow Coven members to protect them from John Ashcroft and Tom Ridge, in case there is no statute of limitations for contemplating crimes against Homeland Security.