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Origins IV: Ms. B. Abzug

No relation to the Senator, she always said. Which was mostly true. Her first name was Bonnie and she came from the Bronx, not Brooklyn. Furthermore, she was half Wasp (white anglo sexy Protestant); her mother's maiden name was McComb. That strain perhaps accounted for the copper glints in Ms. Abzug's long, rich, molasses-colored hair, draped in glossy splendor from crown of head to swell of rump. Abzug was twenty-eight years old. A dancer by training, she had first come to the Southwest seven years earlier, member of a college troupe. She fell in love—at first sight—with mountains and desert, deserted her troupe in Albuquerque and continued at the university there, graduating with honors and distinction into the world of unemployment offices, food stamps and basement apartments. She worked as a waitress, as a teller trainee in a bank, as a go-go dancer, as a receptionist in doctors' offices. First for a psychiatrist named Evilsizer, then for a urologist named Glasscock, then for a general surgeon named Sarvis.

Sarvis was the best of a sorry lot. She had stayed with him and after three years was still with him in the multiple capacities of office clerk, nurse-aide and chauffeur (he was incapable of driving a car in city traffic, though perfectly at home with scalpel and forceps slashing

about in another man's gallbladder or excising a chalazion from someone's inner eyelid). When the doctor's wife died in a meaningless accident—plane crash during takeoff from O'Hare Field—she watched him stumble like a sleepwalker through office, ward and eight days until he turned to her with a question. In his eyes. He was twenty-one years older than she. His children were grown up and gone.

Ms. Abzug offered him what consolation she could, which was much, but refused the offer of marriage that followed a year after the accident.

She preferred (she said) the relative independence (she thought) of female bachelorhood. Though she often stayed with the doctor in his home and accompanied him on his travels, she also retained her own quarters, in a humbler part of Albuquerque. Her "quarters" was a hemisphere of petrified polyurethane supported by a geodetic frame of cheap aluminum, the whole resting like an overgrown and pallid fungus on a lot with tomato patch in the wrong or southwestern sector of the city.

The interior of Abzug's dome glittered like the heart of a geode, with dangling silvery mobiles and electric lanterns made of multiperforated No. 8 tin cans hanging from the ceiling, and crystal-line clusters of mirrors and baubles attached at random to the curved interior. On sunny days the translucent single wall admitted a general glow, filling her inner space with pleasure. Beside her princess-size water bed stood a bookshelf loaded with the teenybopper intellectual's standard library of the period: the collected works of J. R. R. Tolkien, Carlos Castaneda, Hermann Hesse, Richard Brautigan, *The Whole Earth Catalog*, the *I Ching*, *The Old Farmer's Almanack* and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Spiders crawled upon the wisdom of Fritz Perls and Prof. Richard ("Baba Ram Dass") Alpert, Ph.D. Lonesome earwigs explored the irrational knots of R. D. Laing. Silverfish ate their way through the cold sludge of R. Buckminster Fuller. She never opened any of them anymore.

The brightest thing in Abzug's dome was a brain. She was too wise to linger long with any fad, though she tested them all. With an intelligence too fine to be violated by ideas, she had learned that she

end of a crosscut saw. She learned how to swing an ax and how to notch the upright posts of a billboard so as to fell it in any desired direction.

When the doctor acquired a lightweight McCulloch chain saw she learned how to operate that too, how to start it, how to oil and refuel it, how to adjust the chain when it became too tight or too loose. With this handy tool they were able to accomplish much more work in limited time although it did raise the ecological question, whatever that meant, of noise and air pollution, the excessive consumption of metal and energy. Endless ramifications. . . .

"No," the doctor said. "Forget all that. Our duty is to destroy billboards."

They proceeded, furtive figures in the night, the sinister black Lincoln with the silvery caduceus on the license tag, the big car parked with motor running on obscure side roads near major highways, the huge man, the short woman, climbing fences, shuffling through the weeds lugging their chain saw and fuel can. They became familiar shapes and smells to the ground squirrels and hoot owls, a major and irritating mystery to the outdoor advertising agencies and the Special Investigation Squad of the Bernalillo County sheriff's department.

Somebody had to do it.

The local press spoke first of meaningless vandalism. Later, for a time, reports of such incidents were suppressed on the theory that publicity might only encourage the vandals. But as the advertising men, the highway patrolmen and the county sheriffs became aware of the repetition of these attacks on private property and the singularity of the targets, comment arose.

Pictures and stories began to appear in the Albuquerque *Journal*, the Santa Fe *New Mexican*, the Taos *News*, the Belen *Bugle*. The Bernalillo County Sheriff denied a report that he had assigned a full-time detective detail to the problem. The outdoor advertising executives, interviewed and quoted, spoke of "common criminals."

Anonymous letters appeared in the mail of city and county officials, all claiming credit for the crimes. The newspaper stories men-

tioned "organized bands of environmental activists," a phrase soon shortened to the much handier and more dramatic "eco-raiders." The county attorneys warned that the perpetrators of these illegal acts, when caught, would be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. Nasty letters, pro and con, appeared in the Letters-to-the-Editor columns.

Doc Sarvis chuckled within his mask, stitching up a stranger's yellow belly. The kid smiled as she read the papers by the evening fire. It was like celebrating Hallowe'en all year round. It was something to do. For the first time in years Ms. Abzug felt the emotion called delight in her cold Bronx heart. She was learning anew the solid satisfaction of good work properly done.

The billboard men schemed, measured costs, drafted new designs, ordered new materials. There was talk of electrifying the uprights, of set guns, of armed watchmen, of rewards to vigilantes. But the billboards followed the highways for hundreds of miles across New Mexico. Where and when the criminals would attack next no one could guess; you'd need a guard for every billboard. There was a phased changeover to steel. The extra costs, of course, could be passed on to the consumers.

One night they went out, Bonnie and Doc, far to the north of the city, to level a target they had chosen weeks earlier. They parked the car out of sight of the highway, on a turnoff, and walked the half mile back to their objective. The usual precautions. As usual he carried the chain saw, she led the way (she had better night vision). They stumbled through the dark, using no other light than that of the stars, following the right-of-way fence. Traffic hissed by on the four-lane freeway, frantic and fast as always, following private tunnels of light through the darkness, oblivious to all but the need to make haste, to get there, somewhere, wherever.

Bonnie and Doc ignored the fanatic engines, disregarded the human minds and bodies hurtling by, paid them no attention at all; why should they? They were working.

They came to the target. It looked the same as before.

MOUNTAIN VIEW RANCHETTE ESTATES
TOMORROW'S NEW WAY OF LIVING TODAY!
Horizon Land & Development Corp.

"Beautiful," she said, leaning against the panting Doc.

"Beautiful," he agreed. After resting a moment he put down his McCulloch, knelt, turned on the switch, set the choke, grasped the throttle and gave a good pull on the starter cord. The snappy little motor buzzed into life; the wicked chain danced forward in its groove. He stood up, the machine vibrating in his hands, eager for destruction. He pushed the oiler button, revved the engine and stepped to the nearest upright post of the billboard.

"Wait," Bonnie said. She was leaning against the center post, tapping it with her knuckles. "Wait a minute."

He didn't hear her. Squeezing the throttle, he set the blade against the post. The saw bounced off with a shriek of steel, a spray of sparks. Doc was dumbfounded for a moment, unable to accept what he saw and heard. Then he shut off the motor.

A blessed quiet in the night. Faces pale in the gloom, they stared at each other.

"Doc," she said, "I told you to wait."

"Steel," he said. Wonderingly he passed a hand over the post, banged on it with his big fist.

"That's what it is."

They waited. They thought.

After a pause she said, "You know what I want for my birthday?"

"What?"

"I want an acetylene torch. With safety goggles."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's not your birthday."

"So?"

The very next night they were back, same place, same sign, this time adequately equipped. The torch functioned perfectly, the intense blue flame licking silently and furiously at the steel, making an ugly

red-hot wound. But in the dark the glare seemed dangerously conspicuous. Doc lowered the torch to the base of the center post, down where it emerged from the stony desert ground, down among the tumbleweed and rabbit brush. Even then the light of the flame seemed much too bold. Bonnie squatted down and opened her coat wide, trying to shield the flame from sight of the passing traffic. Nobody seemed to notice. Nobody stopped. The heedless autos, the belching trucks, all swept past with vicious hiss of rubber, mad roar of engines, rushing into the black oblivion of the night. Maybe nobody cared.

The torch was deadly but it was slow. The molecules of steel released their bonds with one another most painfully, reluctantly, loath to part. The red wound widened slowly, slowly, even though, as expected, the post was hollow.

The torch was slow but it was deadly. Doc and the girl worked steadily, one relieving the other from time to time. Patience, patience. The heavy-gauge alloy yielded to the flame. Progress became discernible. Obvious. Conclusive.

Doc shut off the torch, removed the goggles, wiped his sweating brow. The welcome darkness closed around them.

"She'll go now," he said.

The center post was cut all the way through. The outer posts were each cut more than two thirds through. The great sign rested mostly on its own weight, precariously balanced. A south breeze would make it totter. A child could push it over. Within its gravitational time-space continuum, the billboard's destiny was predetermined, beyond appeal. The arc of its return to earth could have been computed to within a tolerance of three millimeters.

They savored the moment. The intrinsic virtues of free and worthy enterprise. The ghost of Sam Gompers smiled upon their labors.

"Push it over," he said.

"You," she said. "You did most of the work."

"It's your birthday."

Bonnie placed her small brown hands against the lower edge of the sign, above her head, barely within her reach, and leaned. The

billboard—some five tons of steel, wood, paint, bolts and nuts—gave a little groan of protest and began to heel over. A rush of air, then the thundering collision of billboard with earth, the boom of metal, the rack and wrench of ruptured bolts, a mushroom cloud of dust, nothing more. The indifferent traffic raced by, unseeing, uncaring, untouched.

They celebrated at the revolving Skyroom Grill.

“I want a Thanksgiving dinner,” she said.

“It’s not Thanksgiving.”

“If I want a Thanksgiving dinner it’s *got* to be Thanksgiving.”

“That sounds logical.”

“Call the waiter.”

“He won’t believe us.”

“We’ll try to reason with him.”

They reasoned. Food appeared, and wine. They ate, he poured, they drank, the hour slouched by into eternity. Doc spoke.

“Abzug,” the doctor said, “I love you.”

“How much?”

“Too much.”

“That’s not enough.”

Charlie Ray or Ray Charles or somebody at the ivories, playing “Love Gets in Your Eyes,” pianissimo. The circular room, ten stories above the ground, revolved at 0.5 kilometer per hour. All the night lights of Greater Albuquerque New Mex. pop. 300,000 souls lay about them below, the kingdom of neon, electric gardens of baby-ionic splendor surrounded by the bleak, black, slovenly wilderness that never would shape up. Where the lean and hungry coyote skulked, unwilling to extinct. The skunk. The snake. The bug. The worm.

“Marry me,” he said.

“What for?”

“I don’t know. I like ceremony.”

“Why spoil a perfectly good relationship?”

“I’m a lonely old middle-aged meatcutter. I require security. I like the idea of commitment.”

“That’s what they do to crazy people. Are you crazy, Doc?”

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s go to bed. I’m tired.”

“Will you still love me when I’m old?” he asked, filling her glass again with ruby-red La Tache. “Will you still love me when I’m old and bald and fat and impotent?”

“You’re already old, bald, fat and impotent.”

“But rich. Don’t forget that. Would you still love me if I were poor?”

“Hardly.”

“A whiskey wreck of a wino, puttering about in garbage cans on South First Street, barked at by small rabid dogs, hounded by *les fwzz?*”

“No.”

“No?” He took her hand, the left one, which she had left lying on the table. Silver and turquoise glittered richly on her slender wrist. They liked Indian jewelry. They smiled at each other, in the unsteady candlelight in a large round room that turned, on tracks, round and slowly round above the city of tomorrow today.

Good old Doc. She was familiar with each bump on his bulbous head, every freckle on his sunburned dome, each and every wrinkle on that map of nearly fifty years they had agreed to designate—jointly—as Doc Sarvis’s face. She understood his longing well enough. She helped him all she could.

They went home, back to Doc’s old pile of F. L. Wright rock in the foothills. Doc went upstairs. She placed a stack of records (her own) on the spindle of the turntable of the quadrasonic record player (his). Through the four speakers came the heavy beat, the electronic throb, the stylized voices of four young degenerates united in song: some band—the Konks, the Scarabs, the Hateful Dead, the Green Crotch—which grossed about two million a year.

Doc came down in his bathrobe. “Are you playing that god-damned imitation-Negro music again?”

“I like it.”

“That slave music?”

“Some people like it.”

“Who?”

“Everybody I know except you.”

“Hard on the plants, you know. Kills geraniums.”

“Oh, God. All right.” She groaned and changed the program.

They went to bed. From below rose the genteel, discreet and melancholy sounds of Mozart.

“You’re too old for that kind of noise,” he was saying. “Those teen tunes. That bubble-gum music. You’re a grown-up girl now.”

“Well I like it.”

“After I go to work in the morning, okay? You can play it all day then if you want to, okay?”

“It’s your house, Doc.”

“It’s yours too. But we must consider the potted plants.”

Through the open French doors of the bedroom, beyond the second-story terrace, miles away down the sloping plain of the desert, they could see the glow of the great city. Airplanes circled softly, inaudible, above the metropolitan radiance, quiet as fireflies in the distance. Tall searchlights stalked through the velvet dark probing the clouds.

His hands were upon her. She stirred sleepily in his arms, waiting. They “made” love, for quite some time.

“Used to do this all night,” Doc said. “Now it takes me all night to do it.”

“You’re a slow comer,” she said, “but you get there.”

They rested for a while. “How about a river trip?” he said.

“You’ve been promising that for months.”

“This time I mean it.”

“When?”

“Very soon.”

“What made you think of that?”

“I hear the call of the river.”

“That’s the toilet,” she said. “The valve is stuck again.”

She was a walker too, that girl. In lug-soled boots, army shirt, short pants and bush ranger’s hat, she marched along, alone, through Albu-

querque’s only mountains, the pink Sandia range, or tramped about over the volcanoes west of town. She didn’t own a car but on her ten-speed bicycle sometimes pedaled all the fifty miles north to Santa Fe, pack on her narrow back, and from there up into the real mountains, the Sangre de Cristo (Blood of Christ) Mountains, to the end of the pavement, and hiked on to the peaks—Baldy, Truchas, Wheeler—camping alone for two or three nights at a time, while black bear snuffled about her midget tent and mountain lions screamed.

She searched. She hunted. She fasted on the mesa rim, waiting for a vision, and fasted some more, and after a time God appeared incarnate on a platter as a roasted squab with white paper booties on His little drumsticks.

Doc kept muttering about the river. About the Grand Canyon. About a place called Lee’s Ferry and a riverman named Seldom S. Smith.

“Any time,” she said.

Meanwhile they cut down, burned up, defaced and mutilated billboards.

“Kid stuff,” the good doctor complained. “We are meant for finer things. Did you know, my dear, that we have the biggest strip mine in the United States, up near Shiprock? Right here in New Mexico the Land of Enchantment? Have you thought about where all that smog is coming from that blankets the whole bloody Rio Grande valley? Paul Horgan’s ‘great river,’ channelized, subsidized, salinized, trickling into cotton fields under the sulfur skies of New Mexico? Did you know that a consortium of power companies and government agencies are conspiring to open more strip mines and build even more coal-burning power plants in the same four-corners area where all that filth is coming from now? Together with more roads, power lines, railways and pipelines? All in what was once semi-virginal wilderness and still is the most spectacular landscape in the forty-eight contiguous bloody states? Did you know that?”

“I was once a semi-virgin,” she said.

“Did you know that other power companies and the same government agencies are planning even bigger things for the Wyoming-

Montana area? Strip mines bigger than any that have devastated Appalachia? Have you thought about the nukes? Breeder reactors? Strontium, plutonium? Did you know that the oil companies are preparing to disembowel vast areas of Utah and Colorado to recover the oil in oil shale? Are you aware of what the big logging companies are doing to our national forests? Of what the Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation are doing to our streams and rivers? The rangers and game managers to our wildlife? Do you realize what the land developers are doing to what's left of our open spaces? Do you know that Albuquerque-Santa Fe-Taos will soon become one big strip city? The same for Tucson-Phoenix? Seattle to Portland? San Diego to Santa Barbara? Miami to Saint Augustine? Baltimore to Boston? Fort Worth to—"

"They're way ahead of you," she said. "Don't panic, Doc."

"Panic?" he said. "Pandemonium? Pan shall rise again, my dear. The great god Pan."

"Nietzsche said God is dead."

"I'm talking about Pan. *My* God."

"God is dead."

"My God is alive and kicking. Sorry about yours."

"I'm bored," she said. "Amuse me."

"How about a trip down the river?"

"What river?"

"Down *the* river through God's Gulch on a rubber boat with handsome hairy sweaty boatmen waiting on you hand and mouth?"

Bonnie shrugged. "So what're we waiting for?"