

## **Strike** (published on WriteRoom, now defunct)

About two months after the night of the failed shoot-out, on August 15, 1970, Maria Dolores Sanchez, a United Farm Workers organizer that I met at an anti-war march the week before, called me early in the morning. By then, I had been a member of the Revolutionary Union for close to a year. She was hoping I could bring reinforcements to join the UFW picket lines in Salinas, an hour south of San Jose. That morning, seven thousand lettuce pickers went out on strike against the Teamsters and growers who refused to recognize their newly formed union. She asked me to bring as many as I could round up. In response to my calls, five carloads of local activists soon gathered outside my house. Gino passed around steaming cups of coffee and donuts that he and his carload picked up from the Winchell's around the corner.

The sun was slow to show itself through the thinning marine layer, though it would burn through soon. I waited in the driver's seat of my roommate's Volkswagen that I promised to return in time for her evening meeting. Two comrades, Ken and Pamela, sat in back, while Mike (the high schooler) was next to me in front. When all was ready, I pumped the sticky clutch into first gear, then let the engine sputter when I saw Mike open the glove compartment and place a handgun, wrapped in a white tee-shirt, under a stack of maps and box of Kleenex.

"Are you kidding? Get that out of here!" I said, appalled.

Other cars were idling, waiting for me to take the lead. One horn honked, then another.

"Jesus Christ, Mike! We're going to support the farmers, not start a war!"

Charles came to my window. "What's the problem?" he asked, drumming his fingers on the roof.

"Mike's bringing a gun! It's in the glove compartment!"

"No big deal," he said. "Just leave it there Mike, okay? C'mon, Jody, let's get going." He thumped the roof of my car before walking back to his.

"Don't worry, Jody. You always worry." Mike's smile was both endearing and arrogant. He quoted Mao Tse-Tung: "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun."

I pulled out, stripping the gears as I shifted into first.

Mike laughed. "Want me to drive?"



I found Maria Dolores in a dirt parking lot already filled with road-worn trucks and cars. She asked me to accompany her to the farm across the road, while my friends were directed to a bus that would take them to more distant fields.

Across the two-lane highway, Maria Dolores and I linked into a tangled chain of migrant and local farm workers who were blocking access to the largest corporate-owned lettuce field in Salinas. Red flags silk-screened with the stylized black eagle of Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers Union, hung limp from hand held poles in the blooming oppressive heat. Maria Dolores was dressed comfortably in the *campesino* garb of white cotton pants, a hand-embroidered *huichol* top, and leather *huaraches*. It was so bright, I wished I had thought to bring sunglasses and a hat.

We circled the several truckloads of scabs brought in by the grower's foremen. Dry dirt roiled in the wake of our footsteps, dirtying the air already polluted by exhaust fumes from the trucks. Coffee-colored men and women stood corralled on the railed flatbeds, most of them sullen and staring at their feet, a few tall and belligerent. If not for hunger, they likely would rather be anywhere but there.

Holding hands, Maria Dolores and I walked behind an old man wearing much-laundered cotton pajama pants without a shirt. Scarred pockmarks pitted his back and chest. Exhilarated, I took mental photographs of those walking with us: whole families, big sisters and brothers carrying the youngest, the stooped elderly, babies strapped onto their mother's chest with strips of cloth, little girls and boys on the side chasing each other, some kicking a soccer ball, others competing in a game of stickball. Sweating bottles of soda, free for the taking, sat on blankets shaded by brightly striped beach umbrellas where the youngest and oldest rested.

An old man hanging off the truck rails gave the grandfather the finger, yelling to him, "Mario Vasquez! *Chinga tu madre!*" I thought perhaps they had once been friends, but now it was scab vs. striker.

The man ahead of me hawked a gob of phlegm into the road. His aged arms, ropy sinews of muscle bagged in creped skin, wildly gesticulated. Before the fight could escalate, a convoy of black and white vans raced up, barely braking before dozens of cops wearing riot gear jumped out with rifles drawn,

The strikers' chants intensified, fists punched the air.

***Huelga! Huelga! Huelga! (Strike! Strike! Strike!)***

A police commander, squat and thickly muscled, racked and fired a shotgun over his head, the loud clap making me jump. He announced through a bullhorn that the strikers would be arrested if we didn't disperse. A few left – those with children and some of the elderly. The querulous grandfather was led away by a young girl I assumed was his granddaughter. I considered my roommate's car keys in my pocket, and the promise I made to return the VW to her early, but what really worried me was Mike's pistol in the glove compartment. If I was taken to jail, what might happen?

I vacillated about what to do, but my decision was made when Maria Dolores gripped my hand and pulled me to the ground beside her. I sat crossed-legged in the dirt amid a babble of Spanish too fast for me to translate in my head, and tried to put my fears to rest.

The commander again ordered the strikers to leave. Only a few more did. He gave the order to arrest us, en masse. Right away, Maria Dolores was plucked from our circle, handcuffed and taken to the backseat of a patrol car. I stood up to protest, but the women on either side of me held me back, one in English telling me it was okay, I shouldn't worry, Maria Dolores would be all right.

Having grown up together, the rank-and-file policemen were taunted and teased by the local strikers. With jaws clenched below narrowed eyes, the cops pulled up one

person, then another. Most of the strikers went limp, forcing the cops to drag or carry them.

“Her?” The men asked their commander, pointing at me. Until then, I hadn’t realized that I was the only white girl there. His incoherent response became clear when I was hoisted into the air by three of his men, each at least five inches shorter than my six feet.

“*Tan grande!*” said one, pinching my right thigh. “*Muy fuerte!*”

Their sweaty hands let me slip several times, just to grab a breast or grip between my legs. I writhed and kicked, but they held on until we reached a paddy wagon where I was tossed in with no more regard than for a sack of turnips. The women already inside helped me sit up, clucking with dismay. Once stabilized, I saw them all staring at me.

“We want to know, why are you here?” The young woman who asked had the round face and sloped forehead of her Mayan ancestors. Thick black hair tied back in a braid fell to her waist.

“I’m Jody, a friend, una amiga, of Maria Dolores’s.” That was enough to earn me warm smiles in welcome.

I counted – fifteen women, including me, filled the van, and a Chicana officer not much older than my eighteen years crowded in and slammed the door. She cradled a rifle on her lap, but rolled and slipped with the rest of us as the van sped away. Two narrow windows provided little light; the air was dank. Horribly susceptible to carsickness, within blocks spit thickened in the back of my throat. I kept swallowing, hoping desperately that I wouldn’t throw up. When the van stopped only a few minutes later, the rear door was pulled open, sending those closest to the back tumbling out like dice onto the blacktop parking lot.

More paddy wagons drove up to the back of the Salinas jail. I looked closely, and could see that all their passengers were from the same field as myself. I knew then that the cars belonging to the strikers from further fields would be gone by nightfall, leaving the blue Volkswagen exposed. Mike’s gun was a knot in my stomach.

The young guard led us to the processing office where a harried-looking policewoman’s jaw visibly tightened as the room filled. After adding my name to a list, I parked myself on the floor between a desk and a filing cabinet, under a poster of President Nixon. There were close to seventy-five women to process, and I knew it would be a long time before my turn came. Without Maria Dolores, I felt young and timid among the women chattering in Spanish, and was relieved when she finally emerged from an adjacent room, her eyes wincing in the fluorescent brightness.

She spoke to a few of the women still waiting, then slid down the wall to sit beside me.

“Are you okay?” I whispered. “What happened?”

“Nothing really, just bullshit. I’m okay, just very tired, mi amiga, very tired. I think I could sleep for a week.” She closed her eyes and rested her head on her knees.

I stood up to read the wanted posters pinned up on multiple bulletin boards. Men mostly, wanted for drugs, murder, and violent assaults. When I was young and in a post office with my mother, I always studied the pictures, trying to memorize features in case one of them might cross my path, and the habit remained. Finally the booking officer, the only other white person in the room, yelled “Forrester!” She had to extend the camera’s tripod to its full height before directing me to place my feet on painted footsteps with little of the original outlines remaining. Face forward - flash. Turn to the side - flash. Fingers

pressed onto an inkpad, then onto squares on a cardboard form. A routine I'd seen at least a hundred times on television, but this time it was me. I was equal parts fascinated and terrified.

"You'll see the judge in the morning," she said.

"Do you know what I'm being charged with?"

She looked at the paperwork left with her. "Uh, let's see. Unlawful assembly, failure to disperse, obstructing a peace officer."

Peace officers, really? More like pig officers, I thought to myself.

"Morales!" she called.

I was directed to a telephone booth, allowed to make one phone call. Ever mindful of the RU's need for secrecy and security, and given how likely it was the phones were tapped, I called a friend outside but close to the organization.

"Jack, it's Jody," I said, when he answered on the third ring.

"Hey, I thought you were in Salinas." His voice, so normal and matter-of-fact, was in marked contrast to my agitation.

"Yeah, well, the line got busted. I'm calling from jail." I reached in my pocket for a cigarette before remembering they had been confiscated, along with my keys and wallet, leaving only loose change.

"You're okay?" he asked.

"Okay enough. It's just that nobody knows where I am, so I need you to get in touch with Charles when he gets back. Especially remind him about my roommate's car. It's parked with the others, he'll know." I hung up quickly. His sympathetic tone aroused self-pity and tears, neither of which I dared indulge.

The women's jail was housed on the second floor of the station, and was as bleak as I would have imagined it—institutional green walls etched with profanities, stained yellowed linoleum, Venetian blinds hanging crooked from broken strings. Bare fluorescent tubes in the walkway cast a harsh and unforgiving light.

I joined the same women I had been packed with in the van, now packed into a cell with only two metal bunks, and less than three feet of floor space between them. There was a barred window high on the wall and a metal toilet seat over a dark hole, hand-woven shawls already lying beside it so the women could drape themselves when they sat down.

My cellmates were immigrant fieldworkers, many of who had been brought into the United Farmworkers Union by Maria Dolores. The mood lifted once she joined us. Right away, she had them laughing so hard that tears spilled down sunbaked faces. She spoke too quickly for me to follow, but I understood from her gestures that she was telling them about an officer whose genitals peeked out of his shorts during her interrogation. I laughed with them, their gaiety my best assurance that everything would turn out all right. They had anticipated the arrests, Maria Dolores told me, and most of the women had made arrangements for their husbands and children to be cared for.

Over time, I became more comfortable using my high school Spanish, mostly nouns linked with present tense verbs. A young woman, Theresa, sat next to me on the cold floor, sheltering an infant in her wrap. He grasped my finger and I cooed. She asked if I would hold him while she used the toilet.

"*Si, gracias!*" Holding him aroused much emotion in me. He was so precious, so trusting. I tickled his belly with my nose, breathing deeply his scent of baby oil and cornstarch. The women watching me laughed. Some mocked my silly sounds; others

caricatured my awkward pose. They teased, saying I could hold all of their children for as long as I wanted. Theresa came back; the infant lunged for her breast. With Maria Dolores translating, she asked if I had children.

"No, not yet." I wondered if they knew how young I was, or if it would matter. Theresa didn't look much older.

Once she broke the formalities, other women rained questions on me.

"Where do you live?"

"Do you have a sweetheart? *Un novio?*"

"Where are your parents?"

I was astounded to learn that neither their daughters nor their sons would leave the family home until they married. They were scandalized that I didn't live with my parents, even when I told them I left only to go to college.

Many of them were old friends, having met early in their youth. I felt too big for the room—most the women hovered around five-two. My feet were like clown shoes next to theirs, and I sat feeling more and more like a party crasher. The conversation shifted. They gossiped, some argued about the strike, while I closed my eyes, feigning sleep, trying to think of something to say that might bring my politics into the conversation, but, impaired by language, I could think of nothing.

Any gathering of people, especially when among those in the working class, was considered by the RU to be a golden opportunity to educate and guide, but the schism between the strikers' needs and our dogma troubled me. Now face-to-face, I couldn't see them picking up arms against their bosses, let alone the reigning government. What would be their motivation? Many left Mexico illegally in pursuit of a better life and wanted only to return to work protected by a strong union. My grandparents did the same when they escaped from anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe in the early 1900's, seeking only a living wage for their family, food on the table, and a house of their own. Success, to them, was a promise that their offspring might flourish. How could I, a young white college drop-out, tell them they would be better off under the dictatorship of the proletariat? In this context, what did that even mean? Still, I was committed to following all the RU dictates and knew I should at least try to bring up the subject of capitalist oppression. I brooded on that, practicing in my mind what I might say, but finally was too aware of my outsider status to summon up the nerve to speak out loud, even to Maria Dolores. It was a conundrum. I tried to channel Charles—he would know what to say, but would he be right? Not for the first time, I worried that I might be more enamored with the ideals of Communism than the actual ideology.

The rancid odor of a grease fire soon reached our cell, and in a short while, a guard came to say that we would have to do without dinner. Maria Dolores told her about Ana, who was diabetic, and Theresa, who must eat to nourish her son. They were allowed to leave, but surprised us an hour later when they returned with baskets of food prepared by the family members of those arrested. The donut and coffee that was my morning meal had long been digested and I was hungry, my stomach growling so loud that the women closest to me giggled. Warm tortillas, roasted chicken, and ears of corn were dispersed among the cells, and for a while, all that could be heard were the sounds of women crunching and swallowing. Finally sated, I longed only for a cigarette and a cup of coffee.

In the small cell, our bodies were the only pillows to rest upon. We filled the beds, two and three to a mattress. I settled on a top bunk, squeezed next to Maria Dolores, and

laid my head on her lap while she rested hers on my back. I wanted so badly to tell her about the gun, to not be alone with its secret, but I knew she would not be sympathetic, and why should she be?

Lulled by the heat, cradled by soft murmurs and quiet laughter, my eyes soon shut, but I couldn't fully relax. The RU's voice continued to haunt me, insisting on the leadership role that I should be assuming, while fear that Mike's gun would be discovered was multiplied by my worry for my roommate. If the car was impounded, the brunt of the charges would fall on her.

As the light outside greyed, only the low-wattage bulb over the toilet and the buzzing tubes in the hallway allayed the darkness. Hands on the schoolhouse clock mounted on the wall opposite us ticked by so slowly that at times I wondered if it had stopped. It was past nine, then ten, then eleven. Most of my cellmates were asleep, snoring lightly, twitching in their dreams, the scent of dirt, sweat, and unwashed bodies pervasive. I didn't know I had fallen asleep until indecipherable dreams merged into guitars strumming and men singing so insistently that I jolted awake, sliding Maria Dolores off my back. Something was happening outside.

I got to the floor and stood at the window on tiptoes. Below me was a swarm of sombrero crowns with wide brims. The men wearing them, illuminated by the candles they held, were singing *banderos*, love songs, to their wives, mothers, and daughters, singing from their hearts, from the heart of the community. In twos and threes, the women woke up, some comprehending more quickly than others what was happening. Several of the bigger women and I held one, then another, up to the window. They clapped their hands and cried, and I, too, began to cry, caught in the threads of sentiment woven by the music.

Frankincense wafted in, sweetening the stale air. The musicians quieted to allow a priest to lead the Catholic Mass. Next to me heads bent over hands pressed together, rosary beads clicked. Although in contradiction to my godless ideology, I felt privileged to be a silent observer of their rituals. I couldn't help myself—the chorus of song and guitars touched me too deeply, beyond the RU activist I had become, and the atheist my parents raised me to be.

After the men left, I lay down on the floor and this time fell into a deep sleep. The sun was just filtering in when a guard unlocked and opened the cell door. My eyes, crusty with sleep, peeled open.

"Jody Forrester!" He pointed at me, assured of his choice.

I was frightened and didn't want to leave alone.

Maria Dolores, already awake, whispered "*Sera fuerte*. Be strong." I hugged each woman whose name I'd come to know, feeling already the loss of our overnight intimacy.

The guard led me downstairs to the same office where Maria Dolores had been taken the day before, and locked me in without a word. The room was small with dark paneled walls and no windows, only a metal card table and a single chair on either side. The classic interrogation room of police dramas. I fretted and paced, unable to sit, just one thought circling: the gun, they must have found the gun. It seemed a very long time before the door swung open. I expected the commanding officer. Instead, it was the same guard who locked me in.

"You made bail. A lawyer is here for you," he said, his English broken in a Spanish accent. "Follow me."

A man in a three-piece suit and silk tie stood in the lobby. So dressed up, he looked like he'd taken the wrong exit off the freeway. He didn't introduce himself, only said that he was an attorney sent by a colleague to post the five hundred dollar bail bond.

Despite my fears about the VW, I strenuously objected. "We'll be arraigned soon. I should stay!"

"I'm following orders," he said. "The paperwork's already filled out, and your bond's paid." His voice was tired. He must have been awakened very early to get there from San Jose before eight.

The sergeant at the front desk handed me my things. I lit a cigarette, but the lawyer in his new Mercedes asked me to put it out.

Sunlight diffused in the dusty ever-present haze in the Salinas valley. Clotted traffic outside the jail, women walking on the street carrying straw shopping bags, pushing children in strollers. Life had gone on without a thought of those jailed inside.

"Who sent you? Do you have a message for me?" I asked.

"Skip called me, reminding me that I owed him a favor." I recognized the name from the pool of attorneys supportive of the RU agenda. Charles must have called him.

"Nothing more?" He shook his head, slowed at a stop sign, and then shot through. The leather seats were slippery. I dug my toes into the plush floor mat.

We drove directly to the parking field. I could see immediately that the VW wasn't there, although I desperately continued to scan the few cars and trucks still parked.

"My car's gone!" I turned to him, expectant, and hopeful. He must know something.

He shrugged. His lack of concern cautioned me to say no more.

A station wagon full of children drove up, the driver honking its horn. He leaned out the window, waving me over.

"That's it for me," the attorney said.

"Wait, what's happening? Who are they?"

He shook his head and reached over to open the passenger door. I was barely out when he took off, setting off a spray of dirt and stinging pebbles.

Five children were in the middle seat, all staring as I walked towards the car. A girl, maybe four years old, with pink and purple ribbons wound through her long braid, looked through her fingers at me, then ducked when I waved. The passenger door of the car was already open and I slipped in, trying not to cry in front of these people I didn't yet know.

In a jumble of Spanish and English, the driver introduced himself as Manuel, Maria Dolores's husband. He had the strong arms of a laborer, and a reassuring sweetness to his voice. Seeing that I held a cigarette, he struck a match to light it. This simple courtesy calmed me.

"Are you Jody?" he asked, pronouncing the J as a Y as native Spanish speakers do.

"Yes, thank you for picking me up." I could hear my voice, higher pitched than usual, as I struggled to hold back rimming tears. Manuel began driving, one hand on the wheel, the other stretched across the back of my seat.

"I left my car here yesterday, but it's gone." I could feel my face beseeching him.

"Si, I know. I have it, now it's at my house." His wide smile revealed the great pleasure he took in my surprise and relief.

"How did you know, how did you do it?" I asked. The tears spilled over—I could no longer contain them.

"It was easy, just a screwdriver. Your friend, the one with the stutter, phoned me last night, he explained the problem." Manuel didn't remember his name, but I knew it was Charles, and sent a silent thank you to Jack for the message he must have passed on.

The children were giggling and curious. Little fingers touched my matted curls, one tried to comb through them.

"Maria called just a little while ago. She said the arraignment will be at nine and it's almost that now. I have to take you."

"Does she know I'm with you?" Still confused, I was trying to make sense out of what was happening.

"No *senorita*. Your friend, he called again, just now, just as I was leaving for the court. He said that somebody would bail you out, and I should find you here."

Manuel turned a corner and stopped to let me out in front of the courthouse next to the jail, saying he would see me soon. After a few wrong turns, my breathing tense, I found my group already lined up in front of the judge's bench awaiting his entrance. The other women arrested with us sat in wooden seats for their cases to be called. Maria Dolores turned and waved me over with frantic hand gestures.

"*Amiga, que pasa?* Your name, it was just called. Are you all right? Where did you go?" The bailiff frowned. The judge was coming in. I could only squeeze her hand.

In less than five minutes, a trial date was set, and my cellmates released on their own recognizance. I was embarrassed by my privileged early release, though I realized nobody actually knew why I was called out of the cell earlier. I lost track of Maria Dolores and was not sure what to do next when Manuel, with his eye-crinkling smile, appeared out of the crowd to tell me that I should come home with them for breakfast.

"Then you can take your car," he said. Had he been more familiar, I surely would have hugged him.

Maria Dolores was already in the front seat, twin toddlers on her lap. I crowded into the middle seat. The two daughters pushed their older brother away to sit next to me. Their mother settled the erupting quarrel with one stern look. We drove by deserted fields, the lettuce strike evidently still going on. At every entrance UFW representatives held up picket signs. Manuel honked the horn, I waved, the children cheered.

He soon pulled onto a bricked driveway leading to a low-slung ranch house, its cedar siding whitewashed below the roof's gray-brown shingles. Manuel shooed away several mongrels barking madly in greeting. Purple morning glory and pink bougainvillea straggled up the front of the house, anchored on nails set into the wood. Manny, their oldest (nine, I thought), pointed out a swing hanging from a heavily laden avocado tree. He told me he and his father had just finished it for the younger kids. He spoke in accented English, very poised, very proud.

The living room was festive, as though dressed up for a party. Paper flowers with floppy petals made of pink and blue tissue paper lay gathered in bunches behind the furniture and in every corner. Manny told me that they made them to sell. Finger paintings on school-issued newsprint were taped on brick walls. A zoo of pinatas that included Winnie the Pooh and Wile E. Coyote dangled from crossbeams next to multi-colored God's-eyes and flaccid balloons. Maria Dolores sighed when she saw the children's toys left scattered on the floor.

The house soon filled with spicy aromas. Manuel was in the kitchen, cooking *huevos rancheros*, sausage and breakfast potatoes, all smothered, Manny told me, in his dad's own tongue-burning salsa. When Manuel offered me a cup of coffee, I was so greedy for



the hot caffeine that it was an effort not to just open my mouth and pour it in. We both lit cigarettes, his a hand roll, mine a Marlboro.

Maria Dolores joined us, fresh from the shower, the mess of toys on the floor already cleaned up. The beribboned girl, who whispered to me that her name was Monica, stood leaning against my chair until I set her on my lap. This was the family life that I craved. Sitting at their table felt like coming home to a home I'd never known. Until Manuel spoke.

"So, your friend, he said there was a gun in your car?" He sounded more amused than angry. "Yours?"

"Oh my god, no!" How could he even think that? But of course, he didn't know me.

"Then who?" His tongue curled to ferret out bits of tobacco from his front teeth.

"Just some stupid guy who thinks that every demonstration is a potential call for the revolution!" As soon as the words escaped my mouth, I wished I could take them back. RU members were expected to show a united front, our criticisms of each other aired only in meetings, but per usual, my mouth opened of its own accord.

"The *revolucion*, I see." Manuel flicked his tongue out again to gather the stray pieces of tobacco. His lips still turned up, but whether it was a smirk or a smile, I wasn't sure. "And what *revolucion* is that?"

Heat crept up my neck. Here was my opening, but I didn't know what to say, where to start. Monica clasped my hand as though she knew I needed reassuring. My mouth opened but now that I had their attention, the words I hoped to say wouldn't come out. My tongue twisted. That was always my problem. I'm passionate about what I believe in and could argue against wrongs catalyzed by imperialism and capitalism, but lacked the skill to defend an in-depth argument about theory. I was never able to make the language my own. Dialectical materialism. Mass line. Class struggle. How the Maoism of an agrarian revolution pertains to the antagonistic struggle between labor and capital. The words stumbled. I took a deep breath.

"*Basta*, Manuel," Maria Dolores said. "Enough! This is a time to celebrate, not to talk politics!"

He laughed, and the children laughed with him, eager to move the conversation back to themselves. I hated the relief I felt, knowing that once I returned home, I would be expected to judge my performance, and then be judged. What would be most important to my comrades was what I failed to do—I had not aligned the lettuce pickers' struggle with the proletariat revolution; I had not educated them about Mao Tse-Tung; I had made no contacts to follow up on. It would matter little that the women had liked me and that I had liked them. I could be criticized for making myself more important than the Party line and, again, they would be right. I didn't know whether it was my immaturity holding me back, or the certainty that the farmworkers would have thought me ridiculous to think that I knew better what was best for them.

An hour later, satiated with food and family love, I followed Manuel outside to the VW parked behind their house. He stood back while I opened the glove compartment. There it was, still wrapped in the shirt, oblivious of the worry it caused me. Manuel moved forward, took the gun out, and popped open the chamber. A bullet was housed there. He showed me, with a scolding look, that the safety latch was toggled open. Manuel ejected it, then pulled out the 8-bullet clip and put it in his pocket. I hoped he would take the gun too, but didn't stop him when he returned it to the glove

compartment. Embarrassed to blushing red, I couldn't look him in the eye, though I saw that the look he gave me was questioning.

I took the keys from my pocket, and sat in the drivers seat, started the car and drove around front, where the older children waited, their arms full of paper flowers.

"For you," Monica said.

They spread the floppy flowers on the back seat, and put a few in the passenger seat, the pinks and blues a vibrant testimony to my value in their world. At that moment, I was glad I had been myself, with no agenda, without propaganda. I still remember their warmth and how much their inclusion meant to me. Their hugs cheered me as I left the house to drive north on the road I had taken south only the morning before. Soon enough I was on the highway, the windows open until the stink of rotting lettuce got to be too much. I made sure to honk the horn each time I passed the strikers standing sentinel in front of empty fields.

Reluctantly, my thoughts spun forward. I still felt badly that I had failed to take any kind of a leadership role, but I was beginning to feel more confident in the reticence that held me back. Change, I think I only just learned, depended on need, not dogma. This was the first time that it occurred to me that the Revolutionary Union might not have answers for everybody.

Once back in San Jose, I found my collective so angry with Mike for bringing the gun and with Charles for allowing it, that, to my relief, my short answers to their questions about the night before satisfied them.

"Contact has been made," they said. "Good for you, comrade!"

The charges against us were dropped; I never found out why. The grassroots United Farmworkers Union has since come to represent all field workers, not only those in the Central Valley, but north into Oregon, and southeast into Texas. How proud I am to have been a close witness and participant in such a historic struggle. That night was one my heart will always remember.