

Chapter 5

A Reluctant Revolutionary

In the summer of 1985, Reagan implored Gorbachov to tear down the Berlin Wall, Rock Hudson died of AIDS, Route 66 was decertified, and I took a job as receptionist with a young organization called People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. The group was so unknown to the general public that I dealt with calls from a doggie stage mother who thought we were People for *Theatrical* Treatment of Animals and from a man whose accent I couldn't place who thought we were People for the *Ethnic* Treatment of Animals.

I almost quit within a week because the sandal-clad young woman I commuted with chomped on organic carrots for much of the thirty-minute drive. Each muggy morning, as I waited fearfully near my D.C. apartment for her to pick me up en route to PETA's house-cum-headquarters in Bethesda, Maryland, I'd pray she'd switched to bananas, Pop Tarts, even beef jerky—anything that didn't crunch so loudly so early in the morning.

Carpool friction aside, I was anxious to tackle what I hoped would be a career as a full-time animal activist, putting all other odd jobs behind me. I wanted to get up every day and help change the world. When the job at PETA materialized as I was about to graduate, I was ecstatic. I'd be earning a living by living my dream. Upon being told that the starting salary for this dream was \$10,400, I was flabbergasted; it was like winning on the *\$10,000 Pyramid*, plus \$400.

Since the rent in my timeworn, one-room, non-air-conditioned, kitchen-free abode was only \$216 I was now rich enough to fix it up. The splintery hardwood floor got covered with roll after roll after roll of cheap marble contact paper, which, friends said, gave my entire hovel the feel of a clean cabinet. I kept it looking good by requiring visitors to remove their shoes. In thrift shops, I found a

wobbly atomic-era coffee table and a bright orange steel tool shelf to hold my record player, tiny TV and books. I sat and slept on a black foam sofa, above which hung a giant, fluorescent finger-painting I'd found in an alley. My "stove" consisted of a small hot pot, which I'd use to heat a can of spinach and then rinse in the bathroom sink to make instant coffee.

PETA founder Ingrid Newkirk didn't hire me for my decorating or culinary skills, but for my upbeat attitude and the accomplishments of the animal rights club I'd started at American University with my friend Melissa, such as halting the poisoning of AU's pigeons with Avitrol, a chemical that shatters the birds' nervous systems and causes them to flutter and squirm as if caught in a lawnmower before they drop dead. Clippings from the *AU Eagle* had made their way to PETA.

"Well done with the pigeons," Ingrid said, firmly shaking my hand as I sat at her desk in the small converted bedroom. Ingrid's back was to the window, the morning light radiating around her and onto me, making me feel as if I were on stage or under interrogation. I was nervous, wanting to explain how dedicated I was without seeming overeager. I also felt a bit out of place with my short, white spiky hair and red checkerboard shirt; much of the nine person staff then was low-key and longhaired.

"Either you didn't know about us or we didn't know about you," Ingrid said, smiling as she leafed through the articles. It wasn't official yet, but from that point on, I knew I had a job.

I was relieved to find that Ingrid—a bottle-blonde Brit then in her early thirties—is whimsical and irreverent in person, much breezier than the "tough cookie" I'd seen in television debates. We discovered a mutual fascination with *Pee Wee's Playhouse* and lawn ornaments and connected personally as well as professionally. In the '70s, Ingrid had been married to a racecar driver and had a career in the stock market until, one day, while looking to adopt a dog, she happened into the

squalid dog pound near the U.S. Capitol. First, she volunteered to help clean the place up. Then, abandoning her comfortable life, she became D.C.'s first female "pound master"—but refused to allow them to change the title to "pound mistress" as she thought it made her sound like a diet guru. Soon, Ingrid was named director of the Washington Humane Society, tidying it beyond recognition and halting the shelter's sale of refugee animals to laboratories before going on to found PETA in 1980. *Washingtonian* magazine named Ingrid "Washingtonian of the Year" in 1981.

"Since you are familiar with so many animal issues," Ingrid said, "we could really use you as our 'public liaison'—to answer people's questions when they call or write in." I soon realized that this meant "receptionist."

Sitting at my desk in the basement, I answered telephone queries from activists, students and the public, including an earnest Southern woman desperate to find a celebrated baby monkey rescued from a laboratory, where his eyes had been sewn shut. She insisted on squiring him to a religious revival to have him healed. The letter writers tended to be more composed, inquiring about everything from motel chains that allow dogs to which brands of toothpaste aren't tested by being squirted into rabbits' eyes. As these were pre-computer days, I hunted and pecked responses to dozens of letters each day on a clunky old typewriter with a lazy u. It might not sound revolutionary, but I loved it.

Sometimes, I'd hear a commotion coming down the stairs and look outside to see Ingrid trundling Ms. Bea, a walrus-like mutt whose rear-end was paralyzed; Ingrid acted as Bea's back legs, hunching over and propelling her like a wheelbarrow. I'd watch in wonder as Ingrid squeezed her furry friend's behind to make a dog-doo sundae on the lawn, exclaiming, "Good girl!" to an appreciative Bea as she cleaned her up.

Aside from Ingrid, I didn't have much in common with many of my early, earthy colleagues, nice as they were. We shared substance but not style, which seems a silly concern now but was a dilemma for a trendy twenty-year-old. I wasn't interested in this week's bargain at the food co-op, hadn't read the latest *Mother Jones*, and didn't hang out exclusively with vegans.

During my second week, Ingrid blindsided me with the question, "Have you ever been arrested?" I hesitated. Was this a truth test?

"Yes," I finally admitted. "Once. For shoplifting Queen singles. In junior high."

"What I mean," she said, rolling her eyes, "is *would* you get arrested—for animals?"

"What for, exactly?"

"The charge would probably be trespassing. Just a misdemeanor, and that's all I can tell you." I had never considered getting arrested on purpose. I was intrigued, yet cautious of getting too involved too quickly, so I wouldn't commit without knowing more.

A secret action was being planned; anxious activists from all over were calling for directions to PETA from the interstate and the airport, and my higher-ups were conducting suspicious closed-door discussions. Naturally, I tried to eavesdrop but still couldn't figure out what was going on. At the end of the week, I was frustrated and clueless when Ingrid asked me to be at work an hour early the following Monday morning.

I walked through the door at 8 a.m. to an empty house, except for a strange woman on the phone in Ingrid's room. I walked upstairs as she finished her call.

"Hi, I'm Vicki from Toronto Humane," said the smiling redhead as she rose from her chair. "I came down to help with press for the occupation. You must be Dan."

"Occupation?" I asked. She looked at me with surprise. "I guess I'm too new to trust."

"Well, now you can know," she continued. "This morning, 100 PETA members are occupying the grants office at the National Institutes of Health just up the road until NIH stops funding the Gennarelli head-injury lab in Pennsylvania. You know the place."

I knew it well. It was the cover story on the most recent PETA quarterly and had even made *60 Minutes*. Much of my college dormitory had watched it in shock in the TV lounge a few months earlier. Thomas Gennarelli, a top researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, led federally funded experiments—which were filmed—in which giggling, smoking Ivy League medical students gave baboons hallucinogenic drugs, strapped the animals to a table, then cemented their heads into helmets attached to a hydraulic device. At the flip of a switch, the machine blasted the primates' heads so violently that their bound bodies flailed like rag dolls, causing brain damage intended to mimic car crash or football injuries, after which the experimenters pounded the animals' heads out of the helmets with a hammer and screwdriver. Joking around as if in a home movie, the researchers ridiculed the dazed baboons, dangling one aloft by his dislocated shoulder and quipping into the camera, "You better hope the antivivisection people don't get a hold of this film."

Word had gotten out about the videos, and on Memorial Day of 1984 the underground Animal Liberation Front broke into the lab, stole the tapes, and sent them to PETA. PETA catapulted the

case into the national news by coordinating a campaign urging the Reagan administration to halt the lab's million-dollar annual grant. Thousands of protest letters poured in—many from senators, members of Congress, and doctors—yet NIH, the lumbering branch of our government charged with overseeing medical research, wouldn't budge—except to defend the school, the researcher and itself.

Most social or political movements have a watershed moment in which it transcends the fringe and begins to enter the mainstream. It's never the issues themselves that tip the scales but how the powers that be react to them that cause the masses to take notice and sympathize with the oppressed. For the civil rights movement it was when Alabama police throttled peaceful protestors on national television, and for gays it was when officers launched one too many an unprovoked raid at the Stonewall bar, causing a weekend of Greenwich Village riots. Though not as ballyhooed, for animals it was when footage of Gennarelli's sadistic baboon experiments aired coast-to-coast, and instead of condemning the obvious atrocity, NIH said it was more concerned with finding and jailing those who broke into the laboratory to steal the tapes and make them public. Columnists were outraged at the "cruel cronyism," Paul Harvey blasted NIH in his national radio program, and a wave of everyday people who had never before thought of themselves as animal advocates called to join this maverick new group, PETA. It was one of the reasons I finally decided to seek work there, and now here I was practically in the center of the action.

"We need you to hand out news releases to reporters outside Building 31 at NIH, with the updated list of protesters and their hometowns," Vicki instructed me in Ingrid's office. I was happy to finally be in on the Big Secret but instantly regretted that I hadn't agreed to join the troops only a mile away.

NIH is a sprawling maze of hospitals, laboratories, offices, and a spaceship-like medical library, all impeccably landscaped. I sprinted through the quiet complex wondering which buildings held animals. As I turned a corner, I could see TV vans clogging the hilly, circular driveway, which led to

Building 31, a long 14-story structure with big windows. Being inexperienced, I felt as if I was breaking the law just passing out news releases, and my heart raced excitedly.

I hurried up the driveway and spotted Ingrid and handsome PETA co-founder Alex Pacheco giving interviews in the lobby. A few protesters stood behind them with poster-size photos of the terrified baboons from the controversial video. Others were streaming into elevators bound for the eighth floor, where the actual target office was. Surprisingly, there were only a few security guards, and they seemed more preoccupied with the news cameras than with the protesters.

Ingrid waved me over. “You have the releases?” I nodded yes and asked if I could help with anything else. “Yes—want to join us upstairs?” I distributed the releases to the dozen or so reporters and TV crews, and then jumped into an elevator with my new bosses. Chanting echoed from above. When the bell rang on eight, the doors parted and the chanting transformed into cheers for Ingrid and Alex.

Itchy with excitement, I moved on to see the sights and the hundred or so protesters scattered throughout several freshly evacuated office suites. I ran into Alex Pacheco’s mother, Ann, a sweet and goofy lady from Ohio, whose beige blouse was so wet that I thought the police had fired a water cannon at her. She explained that, en route to the raid, she had spilled coffee all over herself and tried to rinse the stain out in the bathroom. I met several people I’d spoken to on the phone, including a stripper from Philadelphia, a veterinarian from San Francisco, a lobbyist from Iowa, a high school student from Maine, a philosophy professor from North Carolina, and a Jewish mother from down the block. Completing my rounds, I found Ingrid in the swank executive office doing my job—answering phones.

“Good morning and thank you for calling NIH. This office will remain closed until NIH stops

funding the hideous baboon experiments at the University of Pennsylvania. Have a pleasant day.”

Click.

Finished with my tour, I joined in the ongoing chants near the elevator bank, which soon had me cringing. “We speak for the animals, their pain and ours are one; we’ll fight for the animals, until their rights are won.” I’ll never shake those plodding, whiny words from my memory. Chants are crucial in keeping people’s spirits up at protests, but no matter the movement, they so often sound like an over-earnest dirge. They’re most effective when they’re funny. At an AIDS march at the Supreme Court, when paranoid police donned rubber gloves before arresting people, we chanted, “They’ll see you on the news—your gloves don’t match your shoes!”

Crowds gathered below to gawk at the signs and posters hanging from the windows and to listen to graphic explanations of why we were there via bullhorns. Sirens wailed onto the scene, but strangely, no cops burst onto the eighth floor.

“When the police arrive, don’t fight with them,” Ingrid and Alex bellowed. “Go limp, chant, or go quietly, but don’t antagonize them. That’s not why we’re here.” Among the troops, a prim housewife in peachy lip gloss nodded in approval, but an unshaven biker didn’t seem convinced.

As the day wore on, some protesters planted themselves around desks and sofas and got to know each other, while others—me included—grew restless. Our lawyer, Gary Francione, a University of Pennsylvania law professor, explained that NIH might wait until we all got tired and left to avoid arresting us, thus keeping the story small and local and the public pressure off. That meant Ingrid and Alex’s job was to keep everybody there, which proved difficult, as everyone had expected to be booked and released in time for dinner. The peace-loving chants began competing with bitter phone arguments as spouses called to explain why they might not be home tonight—or tomorrow night.

Yuppies phoned their offices to call in sick for Tuesday. Others gave up and slunk down the stairwell. I thought of slipping away, too, not because I had a ball-and-chain or unruly boss to fret over but because I'd made plans to "judge" the Miss Universe pageant with a couch full of friends.

We made our own soiree that night in Building 31, which was like a stilted slumber party until two guys broke into the executive office liquor cabinet. I excitedly dashed for a glass, but stopped short when Ingrid yelled at them to put everything back. Trudging around in sad sobriety, I surveyed the muttering, mixed bunch. I was reminded of the scene in *Close Encounters* in which the motley group of total strangers who shared a vision and desperately raced to the UFO-bound mountain suddenly find themselves quietly locked-up and wonder what the hell they are all doing there together.

We worried that the police might take us away in the middle of the night since the cameras were long gone, so people were appointed to take turns monitoring the elevator bank and stairwell. I shared the night shift with an intense, strapping, bearded Vietnam vet who made extra cash posing nude for art classes and a demure, bespectacled nurse from Delaware, who worried about leaving her ailing father alone. I listened and nodded in sincere sympathy, too embarrassed to disclose that my biggest worry was missing the Dolly Parton special on HBO later that week.

We expected canisters of tear gas but instead got gusts of Freon; NIH's master plan consisted of trying to freeze us out by cranking up the air conditioning. We opened windows to let in the balmy summer air, but the office remained icy. Since I wasn't accustomed to air conditioning at home, the place felt like a meat locker to me. Before each of us claimed a patch of polyester carpet to sleep on, we took down curtains to use as blankets. One guy wrapped himself in the American flag, causing a minor squabble with the Vietnam vet. I found shelter under a desk and pulled a phone down to call friends and my parents to whisper a spirited report on the siege, just in case they saw it on the news and got worried.

“Hi, dad? You know the job I just started at that animal group? Well, we’ve all just barricaded ourselves in a government office.” He and my stepmother spoke cautiously, as if I’d joined a cult, warning me to be careful. My mom, on the other hand, wasn’t sure we were going far enough and suggested we strap NIH workers to desktops and threaten to bash them like the baboons unless they stopped the experiments. Well after midnight, as the crickets gossiped in the bushes below, I went fetal to keep warm under the desk and fell asleep.

I was jolted awake at dawn to the sound of a crackling bullhorn, thwacking my noggin on the desk, and suddenly feeling like a freshly abducted Patty Hearst. An irritating early riser had decided to initiate a debate with a janitor arriving for work eight stories down. Thankfully, somebody confiscated her bullhorn, but by now we were all up. Ingrid, looking like a scarecrow with her slept-on hair, gave a strained pep talk and explained we might be here all week. “We cannot give up,” she pleaded to the assembly of zombies.

We had barely wiped the sleep from our eyes when NIH security guards arrived, accompanied by the police. Unfortunately, they hadn’t come to arrest us, just to inspect the overrun offices and make sure we hadn’t ransacked the place. To inflate our ever-dwindling numbers, we declared certain rooms off limits, lying to the authorities that old ladies were still asleep or that young girls were changing. Our lawyer arranged for fruit, hummus sandwiches, and shampoo to be brought in. Following a quick snack and a pseudo-scrub, we pretended to be rejuvenated enough to belt out slogans as workers began to arrive below.

After about ten minutes of nauseating chants, my sleep-deprived vigor had drained away, and when nobody was looking, I made a snap decision to scam into the stairwell. Hurdling down three steps at a time, I thought, *Enough!* I was just beginning to accept the fact that I’d be with my PETA

comrades 9-5 – how could I so suddenly be expected to endure them 24/7? I flung open the emergency exit on the far side of the building and turned my face skyward to marvel at the sunshine and feel the July humidity hug all the Freon out of me. Catching my breath, I reasoned that since the occupation might go on all week, I'd simply unwind a bit at home and slip back in later that day.

On the subway home, the exhilaration I felt at being free from the aggravations of the protest started mixing with guilt for having ditched my colleagues and, worse, of course, the baboons. I put it out of my mind and instead thought of the long bath and calming Carpenters records that awaited me. I trudged into my stale apartment building, bid a weary “hi” to the yellow-finger-nailed Ethiopian superintendent in the rickety elevator, and pondered the surprise 24-hour odyssey I'd just been on. How it made me relish the comforts of even my ramshackle hole of a home. I tossed my keys to the coffee table and glanced down as they clinked atop the PETA magazine. A pulverized baboon with wires coming out of his head glanced back. I quickly looked away and pressed “play” on my answering machine: a dinner date was confirmed, a friend asked why I wasn't at dollar vodka night, and someone wondered if I was involved in the NIH sit-in she'd seen on the news and wished us well. I started to reach for the phone but froze. What would I say? *Yeah, I was there, it was great, but I bailed because I didn't want to miss a TV show?*

Feeling pathetic, I cranked on the bath. Any bravado I had felt about finally being a full-time firebrand was crushed by shame at having deserted the battle at NIH. After years of yearning to be on the frontlines, I'd allowed trivial annoyances to pry me away from one of the most exciting experiences of my life and let down the people I truly admired. Sitting down to pry off my shoes, I looked again at the magazine with the battered baboon on the cover and uneasily forced myself to reconsider my priorities. It took me about 4 seconds. I tore off my clothes, took a short shower, and left as quickly as I had arrived, changing into a green hospital scrub left by a doctor I'd had a fling with in order to penetrate security back at NIH.

I had no problem getting back up to the eighth floor. Ingrid hid her disappointment that I'd left by simply thanking me for coming back. Many of the 20 or so remaining protesters thought that I'd been napping in another room. I hoped they thought that again over the next few days when, thanks to my surgical shirt, I was able to momentarily disappear to have coffee in the NIH cafeteria and read the *Washington Post*. If ever I were kidnapped, my captors would surely shoot me rather than tolerate Mr. Fidget.

The scene I returned to was much different than the one I had arrived at Monday morning. The 100 exuberant protesters jamming several offices had eroded into a bored and weary skeleton crew, which stayed more out of respect for Ingrid and Alex than for any true hope that we could stop the baboon experiments. That was a good enough reason for me, too, and not just because I wanted to nullify the poor impression I must have made on my new employers.

By Tuesday evening, the phones were cut off and, this being before cell phones, our only connection to the outside world was through Alex Pacheco's walkie-talkie and an old, tiny portable television. When NIH declared that no more food could be brought in, our crafty attorney smuggled in a fifty-foot rope, which we dangled out a window for volunteers to tie to a food basket before we hoisted it back up. The rope trick kept the story alive, and watching each other in fuzzy black and white on the news at 11 cheered us up. Although the occupation was well covered in Washington, the story was dwarfed nationally by President Reagan's sudden surgery to remove polyps from his colon, a procedure happening directly across from NIH at the Naval Hospital. More than once, we fluttered our arms out the window, hollering "Over here!" to aloof reporters in a CNN van. How frustrating that some stations wouldn't air the baboon-bashing video because it was "too graphic" yet had no problem flooding the airwaves with x-rays of our Commander in Chief's diseased digestive track.

Finally, early Wednesday morning, three days after the occupation began, we received a crucial boost when the *Today* show made good on an offer for Ingrid to appear and plead our case. She sneaked out for the coast-to-coast chat with Jane Pauley via satellite from NBC's nearby studio, and the producers were gutsy enough to show the baboon video during the breakfast hour. Watching the segment on the contraband portable television as if it were the lunar landing, we prayed that someone in a position to help was tuning in.

As if sent from heaven, or maybe to play a cruel joke, a man in a suit came up our sequestered stairwell later that same day, saying he worked for Margaret Heckler, Reagan's secretary of Health and Human Services – NIH's boss. He explained that Heckler had seen our protest on the news but that NIH refused to hand over the infamous baboon tape. Ingrid and Alex gave him the video along with a folder bulging with damning critiques of the experiment from various medical experts. We crossed our fatigued fingers and hoped that he was authentic.

Just about a dozen of us remained Thursday morning when writer/protestor Jim Mason and his girlfriend Nora decided to leave and begin their long drive back to Connecticut. He planned to pen a lively account of PETA's valiant, if unsuccessful efforts to save the baboons. As they wearily drove north on Interstate 95 with the radio on to keep them alert, Jim and Nora were wrenched from their bucket seats by a national CBS News report that the Reagan administration would surrender to animal activists and end the University of Pennsylvania head injury experiments. Just after Jim had left, Margaret Heckler's man had returned to fetch Alex for an urgent meeting with humiliated NIH officials. Heckler had been sickened by the video and scheduled a noontime news conference to announce she would intervene and shut down the lab.

Things seemed to shift into a dreamlike slow motion when the incredible news was confirmed.

Ingrid announced we'd give back the eighth floor tidier than we found it, then rushed downstairs to call PETA so that the media could be alerted that we'd be streaming out of Building 31 in an hour. Amid outbursts of emotion, heightened by our lack of sleep, we cleaned and dusted the office and re-hung drapes and flags. From the windows we could see news crews, PETA volunteers and curious NIH workers gathering outside.

Shortly after noon, the chants began one last time in the elevator bank, but this time, instead of cringing, I cried. We filed out slowly, one by one, as if it were still important that our numbers seem inflated, holding aloft the heartbreaking posters of the baboons. At last, they had won their reprieve. Alex made a brief speech praising Margaret Heckler and blasting NIH. Then began the media frenzy. One reporter asked me what the occupation signified.

"It shows there's a way of beating the bureaucrats," I responded. The quote, along with a headline declaring "Protesters' Sit-in Halts Research," appeared in *USA Today*, which impressed my dad. The win was so significant that we made all three national network news shows that evening. "Medical research is important," said Reagan cabinet member Heckler. "But so are the animal victims of this research." She was soon "reassigned" overseas as the ambassador to Ireland.

I began the week as a receptionist and finished it feeling like a real revolutionary. Inspired by being near the core of such a strategic triumph and empowered by the fact that my job involved so much more than answering phones and letters, I became more entrenched at work and was soon invited to join brainstorming meetings. Better still, I was able to hitch a ride to work with a new hire who was too sluggish in the morning to even consider eating carrots.