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JAMES HAMILTON

From Heroism to Madness

The Odyssey of the Man Who Shot Al Lowenstein

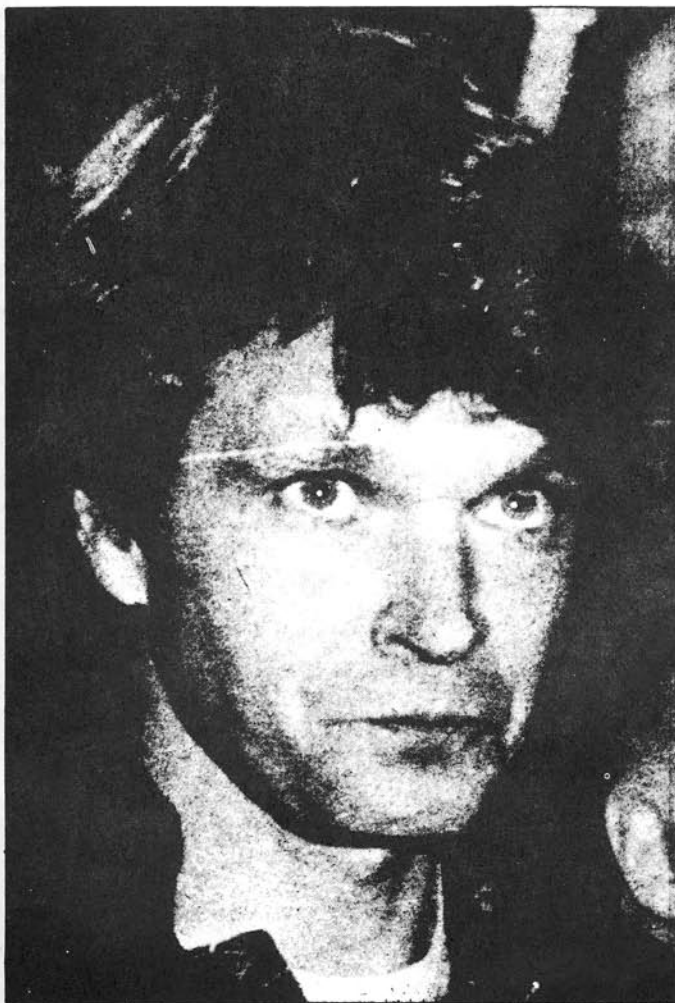
By Teresa Carpenter

There is no denying what Dennis Sweeney did. He walked out of a sleetstorm last March into the Associated Press Building on Rockefeller Plaza, took the elevator to the ninth floor, and, within 20 minutes of entering the law offices of Layton & Sherman, shot Allard Lowenstein dead with a Spanish pistol.

Precisely what happened during those 20 minutes is unclear. But some things are known for certain. Sweeney complained that Lowenstein was tormenting him with voices. Lowenstein had heard about these voices before. He knew Sweeney hated him. He knew that Sweeney was paranoid and convinced some mysterious forces were trying to kill him. Lowenstein tried to reason.

"You're sick, Dennis," he said. "You need a psychiatrist."

It was a fatal miscalculation. Sweeney pulled the pistol and fired seven shots. Five struck Lowenstein in the chest, stomach, and left elbow. Sweeney then walked to the anteroom, placed the gun on a desk, sat down, and calmly smoked a handrolled tobacco cigarette. He did not try to run. In the wake of panic and weeping that followed, Sweeney conducted himself with (Continued on page 24)



Dennis Sweeney on the day of his arrest.

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 an eerie dignity. And while the great and near-great prepared eulogies to Lowenstein—congressman, civil rights activist, nemesis of Lyndon Baines Johnson—Sweeney was led away to Bellevue like a sleepwalker.

During the weeks that followed, commentators cast about for reasons. Some tried to explain the murder in purely political terms. Sweeney, after all, had been in Lowenstein's charismatic thrall until the two had a falling out over the ideology of the civil rights movement. Some said privately that Sweeney's act—knocking off one of the prime exponents of American liberalism—was not a totally irrational end to a radical's career. A more bizarre tale circulated that Sweeney was an assassin working his way through the Kennedy campaign from Lowenstein to the

California, but no letter ever arrived. Dennis never saw his father again. In the early '50s the family received word that he had been killed in Korea.

For a time, Dennis and his mother lived with his grandparents. He was sent to a boy's ranch, where he stayed for a year and a half under the mistaken impression that he was being punished. When his mother remarried, he returned to the family and was adopted by his stepfather, Jerry Sweeney. He did not want to take his stepfather's name. He did not much like Jerry Sweeney, a perfectionist who demanded that the hair in his household be combed and the ashtrays emptied. At 18, Dennis was liberated by a scholarship to Stanford.

That he was not from a wealthy family set him apart from the generally privileged and complacent student majority. He

was 1961. As was the case wherever he went, he revealed a genius for exciting in students a passion for liberal causes. He had been president of the National Student Association 10 years before and had ties with student organizations all across the nation. His arrival at Stanford coincided fortuitously with a national momentum toward reform. The electricity of the freedom rides and sit-ins, and the incipient student activism at Berkeley across the bay, all managed to penetrate Stanford's peel of privilege and send a charge through the campus. To the chagrin of the Stanford administration, Lowenstein set about politicizing students. His method was the same wherever he went. He sought out leaders or prospective leaders whose influence he could use. He got them angry about social inequities, then told them what they could do about it.

Lowenstein courted the brightest, cultivated them, and drew them into his personal cadre. And among those he appointed as one of his personal lieutenants was Dennis Sweeney. Sweeney was terribly flattered, for he thought Lowenstein was "super smart." Al, he told a friend, showed you how to go out on a limb instead of clinging to the trunk. Lowenstein and Sweeney had long talks at night in Lowenstein's Stanford resident quarters. Their relationship, however, was not an exclusive one-on-one of mentor to protegee. "The relationship Al had with Dennis," says one man, "is the same one he had with a thousand other people. Al had a need for adulation from a whole host of admirers." Sweeney seemed content to be one of the Chosen.

Lowenstein set out an agenda of "important" projects that bound his lieutenants to him even after he left the following year to teach at a college in North Carolina.

Civil rights was clearly one of Lowenstein's important projects. He had become something of a cult hero with the publication of *Brutal Mandate*, a chronicle of the black struggle in Southwest Africa. But it was not until the summer of 1963 that he entered in earnest the movement in Mississippi. Lowenstein was summoned to Jackson that July by Aaron Henry, head of the Mississippi NAACP. The movement there was plagued by disputes and Henry appealed to Lowenstein to mediate differences between Charles Evers and Bob Moses, the soulful, soft-spoken leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. In later years Lowenstein was to recall that he found the movement a shambles. That may be an exaggeration. It was true, however, that the SNCC and CORE workers who had been absorbing shocks for so many months were worn down. Moses, looking for a means to restore the movement's momentum, listened to Lowenstein's rapid-fire proposals. One was to run Henry for governor in a massive mock balloting that would show Mississippi blacks the potential power of their vote. He also proposed importing white students from northern campuses to help with the legwork. The prospect of opening SNCC that far to whites made many blacks uneasy. They sensed that Lowenstein saw the movement as a vehicle for his personal ambitions and that scores of white recruits answerable to him would give him a power base. Yet SNCC had grown cynical enough to realize it could use the students to draw attention to Mississippi. The death of one white might move the government to action in a way that the deaths of 10 blacks might not. Late in the summer of 1963, the students began arriving. Among the first was Sweeney, who worked for SNCC and CORE in Jackson and, after returning to campus in the fall, organized fund-raising rallies for the Henry campaign. When a call came late one October night that Lowenstein had been jailed for walking across a street at 1:30 a.m., Sweeney and three others left in the middle of midterms and drove 48 hours straight to Oxford to come to his assistance. They stayed another week to work in the Freedom balloting, which turned out over 100,000 votes for Henry.

rarely smiled. His front teeth were strange. One had been broken in a first-grade playground accident and had never been repaired. Yet he was oddly appealing.

"He was an attractive guy," says one woman who knew him as a freshman at Stanford. "He was bright, intense yet vulnerable, and unworldly, too. One time he took a date to a frat party and they both got reeling drunk on skip-and-go-naked [spiked punch]. Next morning the police found them asleep on the front lawn. Dennis was suspended. We all just shook our heads because no one could imagine anyone less likely to get into trouble than Dennis."

Sweeney matured rapidly, chose his friends with care, and sought out the most charismatic men on campus. Among these was Robert McAfee Brown, a professor of religion who was jailed in 1960 for taking part in a Freedom Ride. Under Brown's influence, Sweeney connected with politics and religion. He seriously considered attending seminary and becoming a minister—not, as someone later observed, for reasons of piety, but because religion appealed to his intellectual curiosity. He also came under the sway of a gentle Quaker named Dwight Clark, who instilled in him the need to choose a calling rather than an occupation. After that, Sweeney never again thought in terms of a conventional career. He saw himself destined for more transcendent pursuits but was a little uncertain how to proceed. Until he met Lowenstein.

Lowenstein descended upon Stanford in a breathless frenzy to spend one year as visiting professor of political science. That

assumed a mythic stature among his Stanford peers. "He was so dead committed and dead sure," recalls friend Patty Hagan. "There was no question in his mind but that he should go to work in Mississippi. It was a decision all of us had to reckon with at that time. We knew there was real danger in the South. There was never any question in Dennis's mind. I felt guilty in his presence. He had a way of making you feel that you just weren't committed enough. He was a saint, sure of his beliefs, and he was not going to make any compromises."

No one realized when Sweeney left to work in the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project that he would not return, that he would find his calling and slip into a stream of history.

He requested an assignment to McComb, and the fact that he received it indicates the respect he enjoyed. New recruits were never sent to McComb. It was the most dangerous assignment in the state, the place one went only if one was prepared to die. The whites were more vicious and more inclined to violence than elsewhere. Sweeney was, furthermore, one of the first whites to integrate the project there, a fact which SNCC knew was certain to draw violence upon the McComb Freedom House. The eight blacks and two whites who shared the frame home at 702 Wall Street knew they might be killed on a whim. At about four o'clock one July morning, the Freedom House was bombed. A blast calculated at the equivalent of 17 sticks of dynamite went off six feet from Sweeney's bed. Miraculously he suffered only a mild concussion.

Violence of that magnitude was shocking to the volunteers who had come South with notions that racism would wither in the face of goodwill. Explosives cracked the surface of their innocence. Timidity and propriety fell away. Many became arrogant and promiscuous. They jockeyed for power and curried the favor of leaders. Exploitation of a hundred varieties produced wrenching and passionate emotions. Yet there evolved, at some more basic level, a paradoxical unity. In McComb, particularly, where the threat of violence was constant, blacks and whites within SNCC let barriers drop and clung to each other for survival.

That unity, which later came to be called "the beloved community," appealed mightily to the ministerial bent in Sweeney. To be locked in struggle with social evil in the Mississippi Delta satisfied his yearning for vocation. Mississippi gave his life form, and that Freedom Summer, with all its tension and terror, contained the most perfectly realized moments of Sweeney's career. Rushed along by events, he did not have to reckon with whatever turmoil roiled in his subconscious. He had important work to do.

Sweeney spent most of his time in voter registration for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The MFDP had been formed by Moses, Lowenstein, and others to provide an alternative to the racist Dixiecrats. By setting up a party of their own and holding elections parallel to those of the Dixiecrats, SNCC, CORE, and allied freedom groups hoped to send their own set of delegates to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City that August. There they planned to unseat the regular Mississippi delegation, humiliate the Dixiecrats, and demonstrate the power of the black vote. Moderates like Moses placed their prestige on the line by agreeing to work within the Democratic Party. But burgeoning radicals within SNCC felt the party was not to be trusted. At Atlantic City, the liberals—under heavy pressure from Lyndon Johnson—agreed to a compromise which gave the Freedom Democrats only two at-large seats, an insulting sop to the MFDP. Moses felt justifiably bitter, as did SNCC workers. The man who became most closely associated with that betrayal was Lowenstein. He was the white northern liberal most directly within striking distance.

During that overheated Mississippi summer, Lowenstein had flown in and out negotiating on the MFDP's behalf with the administration and regular Democrats. SNCC members grew to resent his

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candidate himself. No one, however, expected to find in politics alone why Sweeney was driven to such intimate violence. At only one level is he a parable of the left. His story contains unique and personal turmoil and his motive undoubtedly springs from a nexus of politics and psychosis.

Precisely when or where during his career that intersection occurred, no one is sure. But people who had known the two men as friends have wracked their memories for some foreshadowing. Nearly everyone who was close to Sweeney at some time over the past 20 years had heard that he had grown reclusive and strange, haunted by voices and disembodied tormentors. The Sweeney they recalled was a perennial youth, endowed, in retrospect, with nearly mythic qualities of bravery and idealism. They could not imagine how he could have been so broken along the way, been so transformed by the years, as to arrive at Lowenstein's office one afternoon carrying a loaded pistol.

Sweeney was never one to talk about his problems. He was particularly close-mouthed when it came to his family, only alluding now and then to a sad and unsettled boyhood in Portland. His parents separated shortly after he was born in 1943, and his father, a career military man, left for England alone. He did not return for a visit until his son was two, and then stayed only one month. During that time, however, he managed to so completely insinuate himself into his son's affections that their parting was traumatic. He promised to send Dennis a letter from

sporadic arrivals and departures. They saw him angling for control and resented his tendency to issue orders rather than participate in the democratic, tedious, and often futile decision-making with which SNCC conducted business. For his part, Lowenstein did not like SNCC's "metaphysical" style. He preferred, he said, a structured democracy to the more amorphous democracy fostered by Moses. By the time the convention rolled around, Lowenstein and Moses had been at odds for months. During Freedom Summer, Sweeney's loyalties shifted to Moses, whom he had grown to revere as an existential saint. After Atlantic City, when the battle lines within the movement were drawn, Lowenstein joined the radicals who cursed Lowenstein and the liberals for years of accumulated grievances, for selling out, for promising what they could not deliver, for talking freedom and refusing to provide federal protection for those who were laying their lives on the line.

For months after Atlantic City, Lowenstein confided in mutual friends that "Dennis is mad at me." Two years before his death, Lowenstein gave a tape-recorded interview to a SNCC historian, recalling how he and Sweeney "met under very ugly kinds of circumstances at places where he would attack me from a very personal feeling." Whether these encounters were as ugly as Lowenstein suggested is debatable. Their falling out did not appear at the time to be the result of any murderous alienation. Sweeney, looking back from the vantage point of his new radical sophistication, probably felt a little used, a little embarrassed by the memory of his own unabashed adoration. There was suspicion, even back at Stanford, that Lowenstein never dealt quite honestly in personal matters. There was an undeniable tension between Lowenstein and the young men in his following. "I know that many of us, most of us had passes made at us from Al," says a friend of both Sweeney and Lowenstein from the Stanford period. Often they weren't overt or verbal proposals "but clearly testing . . . to be offered an overnight room and to discover that there was one bed."

After the shooting, in fact, there were rumors that Lowenstein and Sweeney had fallen out as the result of a lover's quarrel. Everyone simply assumed that Lowenstein had approached Sweeney. (Now, from his cell at Rikers Island, Sweeney denies that they ever had a relationship. Once while he and Lowenstein were traveling through Mississippi together, they checked into a motel. According to Sweeney, Lowenstein made a pass and Sweeney rebuffed it. Sweeney is not angry with Lowenstein, he claims. Nor does he feel any shame. It's just that Lowenstein wasn't always above board.)

Sweeney dropped out of school to become a SNCC employee at \$10 a week. Back on campus he was a hero. The *Stanford Daily* chronicled his repeated arrests on page one. He was exuberant reporting back to friends, "I feel that I have a real job now—that I'm not just on sabbatical leave."

Tension between blacks and whites within SNCC increased. After the bombing stopped, federal money began pouring in and Sweeney argued with local leaders over how it should be spent. He felt some of them were building their own empires at the expense of the movement. He spent less time in McComb and more out in rural Amite County, where he didn't have to acknowledge so clearly that the beloved community was dissolving around him.

At this critical passage, Sweeney discovered Mary King, who had grown up in New York the daughter of a white southern Methodist minister, was a photographer and had been around the movement since 1962. She worked as a photographer in the SNCC communications department. She was never an organizer. That work was considered too dangerous for women. She was one of the first feminists to protest machismo in the civil rights movement. Within SNCC, King was considered off-limits for casual sex. She had too much class to sleep around the way a lot of the younger white girls

meeting in Atlanta in September, 1964. She was descending a stairway carrying her cameras. When she smiled and said "Hello," he was so flustered he could scarcely speak. Martin recalls that he talked about Mary all day. During the weeks that followed, he arranged his schedule so it would coincide with hers. One Friday morning he brought her back to McComb and confided to Martin that he intended to marry her.

Politically, King was Sweeney's temporary salvation. She had contacts within SDS and the war movement which opened up new avenues for him. Sweeney moved out of the Freedom House sometime in March 1965, and that spring he and King became "floaters" wandering about Mississippi taking up projects here and there. But belonging nowhere. For Sweeney, that was a bitter realization. Only a year

the emotional concert of that time is a very private thing." Sweeney, she recalls, was not unusually bitter about the Mississippi experience. Nor could she recall any angry outbursts about Lowenstein. For some time after they returned to Palo Alto, however, they were both listless. Sweeney, especially, appeared to one friend "bashed in." It was very soon apparent that the marriage was a mistake. In the South they had needed one another to survive, but in California the differences between them grew more pronounced. King was essentially strongwilled and tenacious. Sweeney was tending to drift. During the end of his tenure in Mississippi, he had tried to take on too many projects and couldn't seem to complete any of them. That kind of faltering was foreign to King's nature. "His lack of sense of purpose was one of the problems," King recalls. "I felt kind of lost too,

"His upset seemed so political," recalls one friend. "It was the form we all took in those days. . . ."

Sweeney reenrolled at Stanford in 1966, then dropped out once again, this time to devote himself to the peace movement. Early in 1967 he went to live at the Peace and Liberation Commune formed by Resistance leader David Harris and a handful of others. Harris, a conspicuously straight jock from Fresno, had gone through some rapid changes as an underclassman and had, in his own words, "been reborn" a radical. He had been to Mississippi for a few weeks in the fall of 1964. He never met Sweeney, but he respected, and perhaps envied, his solid SNCC credentials. Sweeney, for his part, was eager to immerse himself in another cause and threw himself into the Palo Alto Resistance House. The monthly govern-



Dennis Sweeney in Mississippi in 1964

before, the movement required his sacrifice. He had been taken beyond himself, perhaps made courageous beyond his capabilities. But in the summer of 1965 the movement had no more need of him—or any white. The militants were emerging, telling whites to go back North and organize their own communities. Sweeney and King were never forcibly expelled. Whites were not purged from SNCC until December, 1966. Mary, however, was cut from the payroll in a dispute over her work in the antiwar movement. After that, she and Sweeney resigned from SNCC and were married that fall in an intimate feminist ceremony. The only guests were Bob Moses and his wife. King kept her own name. Months later she told a friend that marrying was the only way either she or Dennis could muster the strength to leave Mississippi.

If anyone is in the position to recall Sweeney's frame of mind at the time he left the South, it is Mary King. Her recollection is vague, but she recalls that "it was very difficult. Everywhere you turned at SNCC meetings you would see bottles of Maalox. It didn't make us bitter. Sad-

but I think I'm more pragmatic. It seemed self-indulgent to wallow in uncertainty. Dennis was more brooding." King began going her own way. "She was just out of his control," says a friend who later lived with Sweeney. "He wished he had more influence upon her and he wished she would consider him a little more."

King and Sweeney stayed together only about nine months. Sweeney later told someone that he came home one day and found her gone. And that was it. (King stayed in Palo Alto for a while working on a filmstrip about farm workers. Then she returned East, where to the amazement of her old friends of the New Left she found a new career in the bosom of liberal politics. After a second unsuccessful marriage, she wed Dr. Peter Bourne, who enjoyed a brief tenure as drug adviser to Jimmy Carter. King herself joined the Carter administration and is now deputy director of the president's ACTION program.)

If Sweeney was devastated by the failure of his marriage, he didn't grieve openly. Like a lot of other old SNCC workers, he was getting heavily into Resistance work. While friends in the movement could tell he was wrestling with internal

ment check that he had received since his father's death he turned over to the commune. He worked as an editor of *Resist*, a monthly magazine for resisters. He became one of the principal planners and decision makers. "Dennis was always the one with quiet common sense," Harris recalls. "When the rest of us would go flying off into the clouds, he would bring us back down to earth." He traveled up and down the Coast organizing and went with the 1967 peace delegation which met with the North Vietnamese and the NLF in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia.

On the surface, at least, things seemed to be falling into place for him. He was, by then, in his mid-twenties, older than anyone else in the house. He was still thin, but his angular features had matured. His front teeth had been repaired in New York by a dentist who offered free care to SNCC workers. During that time, Sweeney was extraordinarily attractive to women. They found him "angelic" and "sweet." He slept with a succession of women; he generally went to their places rather than bringing them to the Resistance House. But his longest relationship was with a woman named Connie Field.

Continued from preceding page

Sweeney met Field at a Resistance conference in Chicago in 1967. She was a boisterous, fun-loving woman from the East, and Sweeney brought her back to live with him at the Resistance House. That was not a happy arrangement, as Field's enthusiasm got on everyone's nerves. The fault was not entirely hers. Rodney Gage, a black musician who became Sweeney's closest friend in the house, explains: "It was almost like a fraternity. We weren't really open and receptive to women."

Field, at any rate, remained an outsider, and that increased Sweeney's own isolation. He had always had trouble slipping into the laid-back life of the commune. He smoked dope and occasionally dropped acid but never got into yoga or meditation. While the others took to Indi-



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Sweeney began to believe his mind was being read. He'd turn on the TV and be startled to find his thoughts on the news.

an cottons, he wore a windbreaker and jeans. He grew a beard but kept it immaculately trimmed and insisted upon cooking liver in the presence of vegetarians.

Sweeney was, furthermore, becoming politically disaffected. Resistance didn't offer him the all-consuming milieu of the civil rights movement, and he was bothered that the commune did not have the clarity of a single ideological line. He was irritated with Harris for spending so much time with Baez at her luxurious home in Carmel Valley. Living off a rich and famous woman, he felt, was not proper conduct for an activist. Conversely, when Harris made the ultimate sacrifice and went to prison for refusing induction, Sweeney muttered that he had a "Jesus Christ complex." Although Sweeney had once espoused nonviolence as a political tactic in SNCC, he was not a convinced pacifist. He couldn't see the point in being a martyr. He pledged at one point to turn his draft card over to the U.S. attorney in San Francisco, but he never did. As the only surviving son of a military family, he was eligible for a deferment. And he took it.

Lowenstein, meanwhile, surfaced occasionally in the Bay area. After the 1964 elections he too had floated. He married and for a while he dropped out altogether to attend to his family's restaurant business. On one visit to Palo Alto he met with Sweeney. The two men embraced, and Lowenstein, noting his former disciple's apparently successful shift from civil rights to resistance, remarked: "You are at the center of things now, Dennis. I am not." Sweeney was flattered, but could not help feeling that Lowenstein was being ironic. By 1967 Lowenstein was back in the

fray. Attacking Resistance for not working within the system, he flew hither and yon mustering support for a "Dump Johnson" initiative, then made his successful run for Congress in New York's fifth district.

While Lowenstein hummed at the heart of American politics, Sweeney wavered at the fringe of radicalism. He could not see his own next political step. Organizing entailed too much drudgery and too little transcendence. Some of the Resistance, finding pure politics less and less satisfying, were turning to art. Sweeney finally turned to music. He owned an acoustic guitar and jammed occasionally with Rodney Gage and other musicians in the house. He was not particularly good, but he was so earnest that the others humored him. When they finally formed a band, they let him play rhythm guitar. The Fool, as they called themselves, went on the road in an old flatbed truck christened "The Green Diamond." They performed their Resistance repertoire at rallies and for a time planned to travel cross-country to Chicago for the Democratic Convention of 1968. In the end, Resistance left Chicago to SDS and the Yippies, and the Fool went on a two-month tour down the California coast to bring its political message to the People. The People were not particularly anxious to listen. In fact, they were frequently abusive. The caravan was a political dud and at the end of the summer the Fool began to fall apart. Sweeney tried to save it, but the others were weary of leading him through his songs. The severing stroke came when Gage left to become a "real" musician. Sweeney felt betrayed and never quite trusted his friends again.

Sweeney and Field moved with two other couples to the upper floor of an old Victorian house in San Francisco. They hoped to form an artistic community, but Field still felt out of place and was increasingly restless to move back East. Late in the fall of 1968, Sweeney left with her for Boston. There, if anywhere, he should have been able to find his niche. Cambridge was populated with a second wave of young radicals. Fred Hampton was murdered. Campus violence was rising. Had Sweeney had it sufficiently together, he could have moved on their momentum. As it was, he seemed out of synch.

As earnestly as he had turned to music, he turned to filmmaking, an area in which he was a total novice. While in California, he and Field had helped edit a low-budget documentary about the Fool's summer tour. And during 1965, while floating in Amite Country, he had run across a filmmaker named Ed Pincus, who was shooting a documentary about civil rights violence in Natchez. Sweeney was intrigued and went around raising funds for this project. Four years later, in Cambridge, he found Pincus with a wonderful pile of excess rushes that would not fit into the polished film. The footage dealt with a 36-year-old black man named Panola who talked about how whites had beaten him down. Sweeney took a look at it and asked if he could edit it into a second film. Pincus agreed. Sweeney, unfortunately, had no particular talent as an editor. Pincus saw the finished version and said "can it." Only after it was heavily reworked by another editor did he allow it to be released. The artistic failure was bitter enough, but Sweeney also caught flak from local radicals who felt Panola was condescending and racist. That was a particularly brutal blow, since Sweeney had begun feeling a vague and inexplicable guilt about his tenure in Mississippi. He was, as one friend put it, "rerunning old films in his head." Whatever his sins, real or imagined, he kept them to himself. He couldn't talk about his turmoil and Field became frustrated. They separated for a time, then reconciled and traveled back west by motorcycle. Within nine months he had left her and begun his drift toward darkness.

Psychosis is frustrating because it invites, then defies analysis. There may be no reasons why Sweeney went insane. One pat rationale offered by people who knew him little or not at all is that the violence of Mississippi drove him mad, but it's

more likely that the void following the violence was his undoing. "Dennis was struggling with some things he could not articulate," says Mendy Samstein, who lived with Sweeney in McComb. "When there was not the movement to sustain externalization of inner difficulty, there was only the inner difficulty. Now there is no inner self at all."

If he was shattered in the South, so too were scores of other northern volunteers who later managed to pick up the pieces. Perhaps a compounding string of disappointments sent Sweeney to the edge. Or perhaps, as Field now suggests, the sickness was like a virus that lay in his brain until isolation and desperation gave it the culture in which to grow. By the time he and Field separated, Sweeney's paranoia had been incubating for many years. Shards of suspicion which had accumulated in his mind derived from circumstances that were commonplace during the '60s. Everyone in McComb knew that he or she had an FBI file. Everyone at the Peace and Liberation Commune knew that the phones were being tapped. An FBI man even visited one day and was sitting in the front room when Harris got out of the shower. Most members of the Resistance dealt with this ubiquitous presence one of two ways: by considering surveillance a badge of honor, or a joke. Sweeney, however, internalized the threat. Surveillance became a sinister thing. He took it very personally. Once an FBI agent called his mother just to say he was keeping an eye on her son.

One member of the Stanford SDS turned out to be an FBI agent, and around the same time it was revealed that Stanford had a classified CIA contract for engineering research. The Resistance demonstrated, and when CIA recruiters held interviews on campus, Sweeney and 10 others broke into the building and stomped in unison on the floor overhead.

Lowenstein, it was rumored, also had ties to the CIA. As far back as 1964 stories circulated through SNCC that he was actually an agent. No one had any proof of this, but in those days anyone using as many airplane tickets as Lowenstein did was marked for suspicion. None of the New Left was really shocked in 1967 when Ramparts reported that the CIA had been setting the international agenda of the National Student Association since 1952, one year after Lowenstein stepped down as president.

Lowenstein, of course, denied any involvement. What matters is not so much whether he was implicated, but that Sweeney felt he was. Once when Gage took note of a copy of *Brutal Mandate* lying on Sweeney's desk, Sweeney shook his head and in his characteristically understated way said he thought Lowenstein had too many CIA ties.

The old Resistance crowd first caught an inkling that something was strange with Sweeney when he and Field arrived by motorcycle from the East. Sweeney got it into his head that his old friend Gage had assaulted Connie. Everyone knew that was absurd. After the split with Field, Sweeney began drifting once more. With Harris in jail, the little Resistance group began disintegrating and Sweeney became lost in the general dissolution. He took odd jobs, drove a hack, carried mail. He moved back to Portland around 1972 and gradually cut himself off from his friends. The voices began to make their subtle, insidious intrusion into his head.

Sweeney began to believe his mind was being read. He would turn on the television and be startled to find his thoughts broadcast on the evening news. He began receiving transmissions of voices, some of which he recognized, some of which he didn't. At first, Lowenstein's was not among them. During that early period of his sickness, Sweeney even visited Lowenstein and complained of some hostile third party that was monitoring his mind.

The transmissions persisted, and in his frantic anxiety to stop them he began checking his body for hardware. He recalled the encounter with Lowenstein in Palo Alto and the words: *You are at the center of things now, Dennis. I am not.* He became convinced Lowenstein was taunt-

ing him; that he knew about the surveillance. Sweeney even entertained the delusion that Lowenstein and whatever insidious agents he controlled had ordered the dentist who repaired his teeth to install a radio receiver in the bridgework. Sweeney tore the dental work out of his mouth. But the torment persisted.

Perhaps the culprit was an electrode in his brain. He confided this to his mother who, terrified that he might try to cut into his scalp, took him to a psychiatric hospital for observation. She tried to have him involuntarily committed, but the courts refused. Sweeney remained at large, lucid and paranoid.

In March 1973, he wrote Leni Wildflower and Paul Potter of SDS that he was working as a dishwasher and planning to finish his last year of college at Portland State. "I'm at the lowest ebb of my life," he wrote, "because of the psychological warfare that is being made on me since about two years ago. . . . I am fairly certain that I have software that I wasn't born with. I have done everything I can do to locate it and remove it. My efforts have all been failures and usually self-destructive. No doubt in the '60s I was party to some behavior that was politically irresponsible. If that incurred a social debt, then I am willing to pay it in reasonable terms [rather than endure] the bureaucratic sadism and infinite guilt which is what I see confronting me."

He was considering, he said, moving to another country; someplace that might be more tolerant of a radical philosophy. But he dreaded the idea of starting over in a new culture at the age of 30. Wildflower and Potter wrote back, urging him to come live with them in San Jose, but he never responded. Instead, he traveled in search of medical help. Not psychotherapy, but surgery. He was looking for a doctor who could remove the electrode. For a time he was an outpatient in a private clinic in Connecticut, but he left after doctors refused to open his skull. He went to France, where he thought he might find a sympathetic surgeon, but was back within a month.

He drifted and lived alone. The voices had destroyed his sexual desire. Sometimes they were benign. His mother, for instance, would come over the waves telling him, "I'm out here in Portland thinking of you." Others were more sinister. Agents of the CIA or FBI would say they were out to kill him. Sometimes they would call him "coward."

During the winter of 1975, Sweeney lived alone in an apartment in Philadelphia. The voices he heard most persistently were those of Lowenstein and Pincus. Perhaps, he thought, if he appealed directly to his tormentors they would stop. He called Lowenstein in New York. Lowenstein later told a friend that he had met Sweeney at Penn Station in Philadelphia. The encounter occurred late one night. Lowenstein entered the deserted waiting area and at first mistook the gaunt and haggard figure who stepped out to meet him for a derelict. Call off your agents, Sweeney said. Get out of my life. At that moment, Lowenstein recalled, Sweeney seemed more threatened than threatening.

Lowenstein was genuinely bewildered. "Why," he would ask friends later, "does Dennis hate me so much?" To the end he probably never understood the sad, disturbed boy behind the protege. More likely, his ego felt pangs from a discipleship gone sour. He thought Sweeney could somehow be made to see reason.

Around 1976 a story circulated through SDS that Sweeney had committed suicide. Wildflower heard the suicide rumor from another worker on Tom Hayden's senatorial campaign. And the following year, at an SDS reunion outside Ann Arbor, she stood and announced that Sweeney had killed himself. There was a gasp of grief, but no one had any reason to doubt this information. From that moment on, many of the old New Left believed Sweeney dead.

Only his mother and a few close friends knew for sure that he was still alive. But even they heard from him infrequently.

Also, Pincus was uncomfortably aware of his existence. Sometime in 1976, when Dennis was working at a mattress factory in Lynn, Massachusetts, he contacted Pincus and told him to call off the voices. Once he even visited his former associate at his home and threw a punch. (The blow was blocked by a visiting friend.) Pincus came to think of gentle Sweeney as a potentially dangerous man. He feared for himself and his family.

Sweeney, however, disappeared into Connecticut, where he became an itinerant carpenter. He had shown some aptitude for woodworking while in the South. Now it became his livelihood. He studied carpentry at a vocational school in Norwich, then moved from town to town in search of work. In 1978 he moved from Fall River to the old harbor town of Mystic, where he took up residence in a gray, three-story house, a cheerless place in which six bachelors shared a common kitchen and generally kept to themselves.

Late in the summer of 1979 he moved to nearby New London, where he rented a sunny room in a renovated barn on the estate of a deceased silk manufacturer. The landlords, Mr. and Mrs. Herman Hamilton, who lived on the premises, found Sweeney an odd and pitiable boy. They had no idea he was all of 37. He was generally quiet and kept to himself. That is why Herman Hamilton, who was outside cultivating tomato plants one summer afternoon, was startled to hear Sweeney shouting up in his room, "Who the hell do you think you are, you sonofabitch? What are you doing here?" Sweeney then slammed his bedroom door. Once when he came to pay his rent, Mrs. Hamilton asked why he moved from place to place. "I have to keep moving," he said. "I know they are following me." Mrs. Hamilton thought he meant creditors.

He got work when he could find it, but there was not much building around New London. He set up a shop of his own in the garage beneath his room. There in the dead of winter he worked lovingly on his own creations, fine pieces of furniture to which he applied coat upon coat of lacquer.

During the months he was in the barn, Sweeney cooked on a hot plate, watched television, and carried on a correspondence with a Stanford psychologist renowned for his work on the physiology of the brain. For some time Sweeney had been collecting books on human psychology. One on self-analysis was heavily underlined. He also kept a journal of sorts, a set of loose sheets in a file folder stored in a Mott's apple juice box. (After the shooting, New York detectives whisked all of these away for the prosecution.)

Sweeney was utterly alone. After one transcendent summer in the sun 16 years earlier, he had drifted into such isolation that the only thing he shared was a bathroom with a middle-aged gentleman down the hall. His old longing for a calling had been subverted into a desperate quest to stop the voices. By this time he had concluded that Lowenstein—and to a lesser degree Pincus—possessed the power to destroy people. Lowenstein, he was sure, had willed the murder of San Francisco Mayor George Moscone in 1978, as well as the 1979 DC-10 crash in Chicago. When a load of lumber fell on Sweeney's head during a construction accident, he attributed that also to the Lowenstein-Pincus syndicate. Sweeney had already resolved to go again to Lowenstein and beg him to stop, when Jerry Sweeney fell dead of a heart attack on a Portland golf course. Sweeney drove to Bradley Field in his green pickup truck and boarded a night flight home. At the funeral he was silent, his gaze riveting and haunted. This was too much. Someone had to stop Lowenstein. The plan he devised contained a simple and chilling logic. He would confront Lowenstein and demand assurances that in the future he would leave Sweeney, his family, and others alone. If he got those assurances, Sweeney intended to drive home to Oregon to live with his mother. If not, he would have to destroy his tormentor.

Sweeney returned to New London the first weekend in March and the following Monday walked several blocks to Raub's

Sporting Goods Store to file an application for a pistol permit. He put a down payment on a 38-caliber Llana Especiala, a Spanish-made pistol built for seven rounds. New London police ran a perfunctory check for criminal record and finding nothing put the application through in a little over a week. On Tuesday, March 13, Sweeney picked up the Llana and a box of 50 bullets. The following day he called the law offices of Layton & Sherman and learned that Lowenstein had not yet returned from the Kennedy campaign in Florida. Later that same afternoon, Lowenstein arrived in town and called in for his messages. He presumably called Sweeney back to set up an appointment for the following day in New York.

By the next morning, Sweeney had boxed his books and other belongings, and had boiled eggs and prepared other perishable foods to carry on the trip. That done, he backed his green pickup to the door of the barn. Then, inexplicably, at about 10 o'clock, he pulled away without loading. Perhaps he got uneasy about the weather. It was raining hard in New York. He went about running errands for a while. He stopped by a former employer's office to pick up a W-2 form. Then he dropped into the Norwich vocational school to request that his transcripts be sent to a school near Portland. He was going, he said, to live with his mother. At 11:30 a.m. he called to reconfirm the appointment with Lowenstein, then drove south on Route 95 to New York.

Precisely at 4 p.m. he walked into the Layton & Sherman office. The receptionist announced him and Lowenstein bustled out to shake hands. What happened after Lowenstein closed the office door behind them is uncertain. Sweeney, according to his own account, issued the ultimatum. Instead of humoring him, Lowenstein tried to reason. He could offer no assurances that the voices would ever stop. Dennis, he said, you're sick and you need a psychiatrist. Sweeney drew the Llana from his windbreaker and emptied the magazine.

Dennis Sweeney is now living in a cell at the Men's Hospital on Riker's Island. He was moved there from Bellevue when doctors found him "delusional" and "seriously impaired." Physically, he resembles some ruined husk—gaunt, jaw deeply lined, teeth missing. Authorities at Rikers say they have offered to have another bridge put in, but that he refuses dental care.

Sweeney's conversations with his court-appointed attorney, Jesse Zaslav, are sometimes lucid, often rambling. He is angry at New York Jews, who, he says, are "paternalistic" and wield too much power in banking. The roots of Sweeney's racial animosity are vague—perhaps they reach back to Mississippi where white Jewish northerners seemed to embody the liberal establishment, or perhaps there is no rational explanation at all for his anti-Semitism. It is oddly selective. Zaslav is an Orthodox Jew and Sweeney professes not to care.

After interrogating Sweeney, the prosecution alluded to a "hit list" of six other persons for whom the defendant said he felt as much antipathy as he did for Lowenstein. To date, Sweeney had named only one. Ed Pincus. "Mr. Pincus," says Zaslav, "is a very lucky man." When the case comes to trial this fall, Zaslav will plead his client not guilty by reason of insanity to charges of murder in the second degree. At that time Sweeney's politics and paranoia will be dissected with meticulous precision.

In the meantime, Sweeney has asked for specific books from those found boxed in his New London room, among them, *The Essence of Christianity*. He has asked for a tape recorder and paper to begin a memoir of his career. Mississippi seems to preoccupy him. So does Lowenstein. Sweeney recently noted the barrenness of Rikers and commented that he hoped it would help drive the voices away. If prison would end his torment, he could learn to live confined. For he still hears Lowenstein's voice and cannot really believe he is dead.



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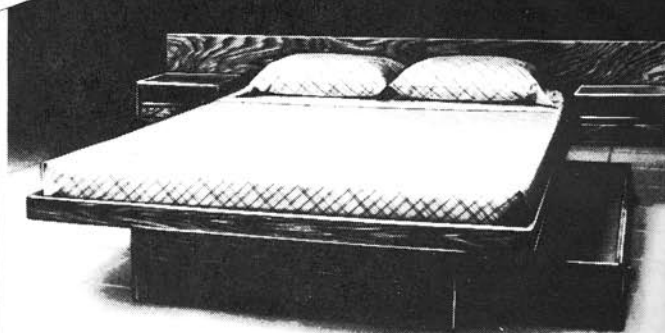
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