

# Anarchist Superstar: The Revolutionary Who Filmed His Own Murder

The Martyrdom of Brad Will

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Even before he was killed by a Mexican policeman's bullet, Brad Will seemed to those who revered him more like a symbol—a living folk song, or a murder ballad—than like a man. This is what the thirty-six-year-old anarchist-journalist's friends remember: tall, skinny Brad in a black hoodie with two fists to the sky, Rocky-style, atop an East Village squat as the wrecking ball swings; Brad, his bike hoisted on his shoulder, making a getaway from cops across the rooftops of taxicabs; Brad, locked down at City Hall disguised as a giant sunflower with patched-together glasses to protest the destruction of New York's guerrilla gardens. Brad (he rarely used his surname, kept it secret in case you were a cop) wore his long brown hair tied up in a knot, but for the right woman—and a lot of women seemed right to Brad—he'd let it sweep down his back almost to his ass. Jessica Lee, one of the few who spurned him, met Brad at an Earth First! action in southwestern Virginia the summer before he was killed. They skipped away from the crowd to a waterfall where Brad stripped naked and invited Lee in her swimsuit to stand with him behind sheets of cascading water. He tried to kiss her, but she turned away. She thought there was something missing inside him. "Like he was incomplete, too lonely," she says. Maybe he was just tired after a decade and a half on the front lines of a revolution that never quite happened.

He was one of America's fifty "leading anarchists," according to *Nightline*, which in 2004 flashed Brad's mug shot as a warning against the black-clad nihilists said to be descending on New York for the Republican National Convention. "Leading anarchist"—that was the kind of clueless oxymoron that made Brad laugh. Brad wasn't a "leader," a word he disdained; he was a catalyst: the long-limbed climber who trained city punks on city trees for forest defense in the big woods west of the Rockies, the smart guy you wanted in the front row when you gave your public report on the anarchist scene in Greece or Seoul or Cincinnati, even though he was also the dude who would giggle when he fumigated the room with monstrous garlic farts. In the 1990s, he'd helped hand New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani a public defeat, organizing anarchist punks into a media-savvy civil-disobedience corps that shamed the mayor into calling off plans to sell the city's community gardens. In the new decade, he became a star of Indymedia's anti-star system, an interconnected anti-corporate press that lets activists communicate—directly instead of waiting to see their causes distorted on *Nightline*.

Brad seemed to be everywhere: One friend remembers him in Ecuador, plucking his bike from a burning barricade; another remembers him in Quebec City, riding a bike *into* a cloud of tear gas, his bony frame shaking with happy rebel laughter later while a comrade poured water into his burning eyes.

Now, Brad has become most famous for the final minutes of his last day alive, October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006, in the capital of the southern state of Oaxaca, Mexico. He'd gone to document a massive strike blowing up into revolt against the government. His video camera peers through broken glass at a smashed computer; holds steady on a strangely peaceful orange-black plume rising from a burning SUV; crawls under a truck to spy on a group of... well, most people who watch Brad's video on YouTube don't know who they are. Cops, probably, though they wear no uniforms. Brad feints and charges toward them along with a small crowd armed with stones and bottle rockets, improbably chasing men toting .38s and AR-15s.

With two minutes left, Brad inches toward the door behind which he knows men with guns may be hiding. "*Si ves a un gringo con cámara, mátalo!*" government supporters ranted on local radio around the time Brad arrived in Oaxaca. "If you see a gringo with a camera, kill him!" Then there are the last words heard on Brad's video before he films a puff of smoke—muzzle flash beneath a gray sun—and his own knees rising up towards the lens as he falls, the cobblestones rushing toward him: "*No esten tomando fotos!*" ("Stop taking pictures!") Brad didn't hear.

He was scheduled to fly back to Brooklyn the next day.

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During the three weeks he spent in Mexico before he was killed, Brad would make fun of his half-assed Spanish by introducing himself as "Qeubrado" ("Broken"). He didn't look it. Six feet two, with a frame broad as his father's – a veteran of Yale's 1960 undefeated football team— he was vegan-lean but rosy with muscle, "a little stinky and a lot gorgeous," remembers his friend Kate Crane. Back during his twenties, when he'd bring a slingshot to demonstrations instead of a camera, he thought of himself as half-warrior, half-poet, a former student of Allen Ginsberg's now specializing in crazy-beautiful Beat gestures recast in a militant mode— "sweet escalation," he called it, protest not as a means to an end but as a glimpse of a world yet to be made.

By the time he got to Oaxaca, in the fall of 2006, he was calling himself a journalist. "His camera was his weapon," says Miguel, a Brazilian filmmaker who has produced a tribute called *Brad: One More Night at the Barricades*. "If you survive me," Brad told a friend after he'd battled cops at a protest in Prague, "tell them this: I never gave up. That's a quote, all right?" In the end there was just a picture, his last shot, the puff of smoke of the bullet speeding toward him.

"*Yo d,*" he wrote to Dyan neary, an ex-girlfriend, three days before he died, "*jumping around like a reporter and working my ass off—been pretty intense and sometimes sketchy.*" The governor of Oaxaca had sent in roving death squads, pickup trucks of paramilitaries firing on the barricades. The bodies were piling up. Brad was getting scared. "*I went back to the morgue—it is a sick and sad place—I have this feeling like I will go back there again with a crowd of reporters all pushing to get the money shot— the body all sewed up and naked— you see it in the papers every day—I am entering a new territory here and don't know if I am ready.*"

Ready for what? Revolution? Blood? Brad had seen both before, in Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil. Oaxaca was bigger, more exciting, more frightening. What had started as a strike by the state's 70,000 teachers had exploded after the governor attacked the teachers with tear gas

and helicopters. The federal government feared a domino effect, other states following Oaxaca's example. In Oaxaca, every kind of leftist organization—indigenous groups, unions, students, farmers, anarcho-punks—came together in an unprecedented coalition and took over the city. The national government declared the entire state of Oaxaca “ungovernable.”

Brad knew what to do: Film it all. He'd send the tapes home, screen them in squats and at anarchist bookstores. Revolution is real, he'd say, here's the proof. Burning tires, masked rebels stuffing rags into bottles full of gasoline, farmers with machetes; free kitchens, free medical clinics, free buses, commandeered by farmers and fishermen. At a street funeral, old women sing a radical anthem with their fists raised in the air; in a red tent at night a father pounds the silver box that holds his son. “*La muerte as gobierno malo!*” shout the mourners. (“Death to the government!”) “*Viva Alejandro!*” Alejandro García Hernández, forty-one years old, shot twice in the head by a group of soldiers who tried to crash through a barricade opened to let an ambulance pass. Brad wrote home, “*And now Alejandro waits in the zocalo*”—the city plaza—“*he's waiting for an impasse, a change, an exit, a way forward, a way out, a solution—waiting for the earth to shift and open—waiting for november when he can sit with his loved ones on the day of the dead and share food and drink and a song...one more martyr in a dirty war...one more bullet cracks the night.*”

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Kenilworth, Illinois, isn't a town that raises radicals. A mile wide, tucked away close to the beach on the North Shore of Chicago, Kenilworth is the kind of place in which the wrong side of the suburb means houses cost only a couple of million dollars. There were four African Americans in the most recent census, and if there were any Democrats around when Brad was growing up, says Stephanie Rogers, a family friend, they kept quiet. “If Kenilworth wasn't the absolute height of preppiness,” she says, “it was only because we were Midwestern. Kids would study that East Coast model, towns like Greenwich, Connecticut. That's what Kenilworth wanted to be.”

Not the Wills. They didn't follow anyone. “The Wills were achievers, and leaders,” says Rogers. For Brad's three older siblings, that meant good grades, sports and student government, Brad was different. “We were all active kids, curious, athletic, and we would roughhouse and play ball,” says his sister Christy, a graphic designer who lives in San Diego. “Brad was less interested in those kinds of things.” He preferred science fiction and fantasy, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings*. And *Star Wars*, one of the few passions he shared with his all-American dad: Hardy, an engineer who owned a small factory, liked to imagine how other worlds might work. Brad liked to build them. He'd arrange miniature societies with his action figures, write modules for role-playing games. It wasn't the monsters that enthralled him, it was the struggles between good and evil.

One of his favorite movies was *It's a Wonderful Life*; lanky, amiable Jimmy Stewart provided a model for the way Brad would move through the world as he grew older, a Teen Beat-gorgeous geek—a dungeon master!—who was friends with jocks, preps, even Kenilworth's tiny clique of stoners. With his feathered hair, his rugby-shirt collar standing proud and a broad smile sprawling beneath dreamy eyes, Brad looked like an extra in a John Hughes movie.

But he was slowly splintering away from the high-school-college-back-to-the-burbs loop that was the natural order of things in Kenilworth. “It was a struggle to open my life,” Brad would

tell a Venezuelan newspaper years later. “I didn’t know much about the truth of the world, but little by little, I forced my eyes open, without the help of anyone.”

The Will children were expected to be athletes (Brad was a runner) and stick with an instrument. But one day Brad announced he was quitting trumpet to play guitar. Instead of joining clubs, he worked after school, as a flower-delivery boy, a library shelver, selling newspaper subscriptions. “Brad was perplexing,” says his mother, Kathy. “But he wasn’t a loaf.”

The one unbendable rule for Will children was college. His sister Wendy went to Stanford, Craig followed their father to Yale, and Christy went to Scripps College. Brad’s grades hovered between B and C, but after he aced his entrance exams he squeaked into Allegheny, a small school in western Pennsylvania. There he joined a frat, majored in the Dead and studied *On the Road*. Mostly he liked getting high, passing a pipe back and forth with his friend Matt Felix, an outdoorsman from New Hampshire who introduced Brad to the radical environmentalism of Earth First! That ethos of direct action and theatrical gestures drew Brad west when he graduated in 1992. He followed the hippie highway to Boulder, Colorado, where he began attending classes taught by Allen Ginsberg at the Naropa Institute’s Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics.

Even more influential than Ginsberg was Peter Lamborn Wilson, who under the pseudonym Hakim Bey was known for a manifesto called *The Temporary Autonomous Zone*, or *T.A.Z.*, a study in “ontological anarchy” and “poetic terrorism,” and a guidebook to the life of Brad was beginning to lead. “What happened was this,” Wilson writes, “they lied to you, sold you ideas of good & evil, gave you distrust of your body & shame for your prophethood of chaos, invented words of disgust for your molecular love, mesmerized you with inattention, bored you with civilization & all its usurious emotions.”

Wilson wasn’t offering an indictment so much as a prescription: “Avatars of chaos act as spies, saboteurs, criminals of *amour fou*—crazy love—neither selfless not selfish, accessible as children, mannered as barbarians, chafed with obsessions, unemployed, sensually deranged, wolfangels...” Brad was becoming one of Wilson’s wolfangels. “Very high-energy, extremely bright, not so well-controlled,” Wilson remembers of the student who talked his way into class because he hadn’t bothered to pay tuition. “Loose at the edges, reckless, you might call it courage. Manic sometimes, charming everybody.”

“Brad liked being in a hotbed of ideas,” says his mother, happy, at least, that her son had a job. She didn’t know that he stopped paying rent. “My crazy poet roomies fled the scene,” he later wrote of his accidental introduction to squatting. “I stayed and didn’t even have the phone number of the landlord.” that suited Brad—cash, he was beginning to believe, was a kind of conspiracy, a form of control he was leaving behind. He wanted to write poems, but even more he wanted to become one, a messy, ecstatic, angry, sprawling embodiment of Wilson’s manifesto.

His first attempt came one summer when 50,000 members of a Christian fundamentalist men’s movement called the Promise Keepers descended on Boulder, distributing a pamphlet called “The Iron Spear: Reaching Out to the Homosexual.” Brad wasn’t gay, but he decided to reach back. The Naropa Institute’s lawn abutted the Promise Keepers’ rally ground, so Brad put on a show: He married a man. He recruited Wilson to perform the ceremony and a poet named Anne Waldman to play his mother. Another student was the bride, in a white satin gown complete with a train, and Brad scrounged a suit and tie. “I actually am a minister in the Universal Life church,” says Wilson. “I married them in full view of the Promise Keepers.” Then Brad kissed the bride, a long smooch that provoked one Promise Keeper to hop the fence to find out whether he was really

seeing two men making out. Brad declared the stunt a victory when the fundamentalist decided to stick around, apparently convinced that poets throw better parties than Promise Keepers.

That was Brad's idea of politics and poetry at the same time: a party and performance. But Brad didn't care for stages. He wanted the show to run 24/7. From Boulder he moved to West Lima, Wisconsin, a half-abandoned town that had become an "intentional community"—a commune—called Dreamtime Village. Dreamtime was like a surreal version of the town Brad had grown up in: There was a post office, a school building, little Midwestern houses and almost no rules. Then, in the summer of 1995, Brad became interested in the stories he heard from a group of New York squatters on a road trip. When they headed back east, Brad hitched a ride.

"I moved to the big shitty as Giuliani-time kicked in," he wrote in an essay for an anarchist anthology, *We Are Everywhere*. In New York, at least, anarchists were concentrated in a few dozen squats, buildings abandoned at the nadir of the city's grim Eighties and rehabbed by whoever wanted to live rent-free. It was illegal, of course, which was part of the attraction for Brad—just living in a squat was a form of direct action, defiance of all the rules about property and propriety. Brad found himself an empty room in a squat on East 5<sup>th</sup> Street, home to around sixty "activists and destructionists," in the words of Pastrami, a yoga teacher who befriended Brad. They hauled water up from fire hydrants and wired an electricity from a streetlight. Next door they cleared the trash out of an abandoned lot and turned it into a garden with a pear tree. They shared it with their Puerto Rican neighbors, eventually winning over even the nuns of the nearby Cabrini seniors home—their response to the squats went from one of horror to prayers for the wild but lovely young creatures who ate the trash and the toxic soil of the city. This was the life Brad had been looking for.

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Anarchist isn't so much a singular ideology as a set of overlapping philosophies, and Brad wanted to explore them all. He'd haunt the anarchist store Blackout Books, in New York's Alphabet City neighborhood, and then he'd disappear for days into volumes he had bought, borrowed or even dumpster-dived, his long, bony hands cracking the spines of old lefty tomes and the quickie compilations of the writings of Subcomandante Marcos, the leader of the Zapatista revolt in Mexico who was fast becoming the new model for anarchist panache. he read Kropotkin, the early-twentieth-century Russian biologist who gave to anarchism its core idea of "mutual aid," the simple but radical premise that cooperation, not competition, is the natural condition of humanity, and he worked with movements like the Ruckus Society, Earth First! and Reclaim the Streets, leaderless networks of activists who put anarchist ideas into action through confrontational tactics—Brad was expert in the construction of "sleeping dragons" and "bear claws," both methods of locking yourself down in front of a bulldozer or in the middle of a city street. The point wasn't a set of demands but the act of disruption itself. In Brad's world, action—direct, local, unfiltered—mattered more than ideology. In theory, anyway. In practice, the anarchist factions often succumb to purist notions, refusing even to speak to comrades they consider co-opted. Not Brad. he was tight with anarcho-primitivists, who view language itself as oppressive, and social anarchists, who write books and build schools. "He was the least sectarian person I ever met," says Dyan Neary. "That's what made it easy for him to introduce people to ideas. He was just sort of user-friendly."

He had a sharp side, too. “Brad did his fair share of alienating people,” says Sascha DuBrul, who like Brad had migrated from Dreamtime to the Lower East Side. “He was so loud and outspoken, and he wasn’t always a big listener.” At the 5<sup>th</sup> Street Squat, he’d “talk really loud” about his building skills, but then, friends say, he wired his room incorrectly, resulting in a small fire. The fire didn’t threaten the building, but it gave Giuliani an excuse to tear it down. “When they came for our building,” Brad wrote, “there weren’t any eviction papers, and they came with a wrecking crane. I snuck inside, felt the rumble when the ball pierced the wall. I was alone. From the roof I watched them dump a chunk of my home on my garden...When it was all over: a rubble heap.”

“I almost feel like he wanted to die up there, he felt so guilty,” a friend told *The Village Voice*. Afterward, Brad undertook a freight-train tour of America, riding in boxcars from city to city, speaking to activist groups about Giuliani’s crackdown. “Brad got incredibly fucking riled up,” remembers DuBrul. “He was on fire, his hands were shaking.”

“He had a certain innocence,” says Stephan Said, a squatter and folk singer Brad admired. “What led him to his death was at the same time what made him so endearing.”

In 1998, Brad went out west to join Earth First! activists for a “forest defense,” which for Brad would consist of spending the summer on a platform built high up around the trunk of an old-growth Douglas fir in Oregon, an anarchist retreat from the laws down below. “I called it the Y plane ‘cause you’re up, up, up off the rules of the X plane,” says Priya Reddy, who’d become one of Brad’s best friends that summer. “The only rule you really have is gravity. It’s homelessness in the best sense.”

A city girl, Reddy—in Oregon she took the name Warcry, a not-so-subtle response to “hippie-ish” tree-sitters like Julia Butterfly—didn’t know how to climb, so at first she provided ground support, hiking from tree to tree in the murky green light, taking orders for supplies. Brad had a different concern. “I dropped a piece of paper,” he called down on her first day. “Could you find it for me?”

Warcry looked into the branches. The voice’s source, 200 feet up, was invisible. So was his piece of paper, fallen amid the thick ferns of the forest floor. When she found it, a folded-up scrap, she took a peek. A battle plan? No; a love poem.

The woods were noisy with the music of the tree-sitters. CDs and tapes of Sonic Youth, Crass and Conflict blasted full volume. The most popular song seemed to be “White Rabbit.” After Warcry heard it for what seemed like the hundredth time, she took a stand. “Why are you people playing *White Rabbit* over and over again?” she demanded. “You don’t know?” came the answer. “It’s a warning.” White Rabbit meant the cops, spotted by Brad or another tree-sitter from their perches far above, were on their way.

Soon Warcry worked up the courage to join Brad in the trees, spending three weeks on a neighboring platform. She brought a video camera. One day loggers brought down a giant within fifty yards of Brad’s and Warcry’s video, but you can hear his raw scream: “Fuuuck!” The tree settles, and Brad shouts at the loggers below. “How old do you think that tree was? How old are you?” It was a question he might have been asking himself—up in his treehouse, there were times he felt like a child, powerless to respond.

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What set Brad apart from so many radical activists was that throughout it all, he remained close to his family, the buttoned-down Republican Wills of Kenilworth. When he was jailed for

nearly a week at the WTO Seattle protests in 1999, one of his chief worries was getting out in time for his mother's sixtieth birthday, which the Wills planned to celebrate in Hawaii. When he made it there, he didn't tell them what had really gone down. "He didn't want to burden us," says his mother.

That's how Brad kept his truce with where he came from. In 2002, when he and Dyan Neary were hopping freight trains from the Northwest to New York, he insisted they take a detour so that Neary—who goes by Glass—could meet his mother. Glass tried to talk politics, telling the Wills about South America coca farmers blasted into extreme poverty by U.S.-funded crop-spraying. Brad's mom looked confused: "But, dear, how do you think we should deal with the cocaine question?" It wasn't meant as a question.

"Later, I was like, *Oh shit, they don't really know what you're doing, do they?*" Brad giggled, proud of his ability to move between worlds.

The two had met shortly after 9/11, their first date a six-hour walk around Ground Zero. Brad was thirty-one; Glass was twenty, tall and skinny with big curves and big eyes and a smile like Brad's, wide and knowing. But she was stunned by New York's transformation from go-go to warmongering. "What the fuck happened to my city?" she thought. They decided it was time to get out of town. There were two complications. The first was monogamy. Brad didn't believe in it. All right, Glass said, no sex. Brad suddenly discovered an untapped well of fidelity. The other problem was thornier: Brad was about to become a father. The mother was a French woman with whom he'd had a brief relationship while she was visiting New York. A month later, she called to tell him she was pregnant. Brad loved kids, but he'd sworn he'd never bring one of his own into a world he considered too damaged. Brad flew over to visit.

"Why don't you stay?" she asked. "We can raise the child together."

"I'll help you out with money," he said—a major commitment, given that he lived on food he found in dumpsters—"but I'm not moving to France."

When the woman had the baby, her new boyfriend adopted him. That seemed to Brad like an ideal solution—he loved the family he already had, but he wasn't looking to start one.

"He wanted to experience revolution," says Glass. "He wanted to live that every day." They spent much of the next two years in South America, returning to New York to raise funds by taking temp jobs—Brad was a lighting grip—and throwing all-night benefit parties. In Brazil, they worked with the *Movimento Sin Terra*, landless poor people who've squatted and won rights to more than 20 million acres of farmland. In Buenos Aires, they joined up with a movement of workers who'd reclaimed factories shuttered by Argentina's economic meltdown. In Bolivia, they met a radical coca farmer named Evo Morales who would soon become the country's first indigenous president. This wasn't the East Village, Brad realized, or a tree platform in Oregon. There was real power at stake.

Now he had a mission. He wanted to show American activists how to join the fight wherever they could find it, or start it. Video, he determined, was his best medium. In 2004, he scraped together \$300 for a used Canon ZR 40 and headed back south, this time on his own. He was ready to start telling stories, ready to become a reporter.

In 2005, in a central-Brazilian squatters' town of 12,000 landless peasants called *Sonho Real* ("Real Dream"), Brad filmed a police attack that resulted in two dead and twenty "missing." Brad was the only reporter on hand. He hid in a shack, filming, and waited for the worst. The cops found him, dragged him out by his hair and beat him to a pulp. Then they smashed his camera and arrested him. "The U.S. Embassy refused to do anything," says Brad's friend Miguel. "They

said, *Yes, we know, but he is not an important person to us.*” But his American passport still carried weight with the Brazilian police. They let him go. He’d managed to keep his tape hidden; soon, it would be broadcast throughout Brazil, a perfect example of Indymedia in action.

But it didn’t seem like a victory to Brad. *“I feel like I am haunted,”* he wrote to his friend Kate Crane. *“I keep seeing a thin woman’s body curled up at the bottom of a well, her body in a strange position—I can’t escape it.”*

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The Mexico to which Brad traveled in early October 2006 seemed like a nation on the verge. Of what, nobody could say. But something was about to break. It was an election year, and a new force in Mexican politics, the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), appeared certain to win the presidency. Vicente Fox, the Bush clone who had deposed the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 2000, was constitutionally forbidden from running again. His anointed successor was Felipe Calderón, an angry bully obsessed with oil and secrecy, the Dick Cheney of Mexico. On July 2<sup>nd</sup>, Mexican television declared the race between Calderón and moderate Andrés Manuel López Obrador too close to call, and the next morning Mexico’s electoral authority made Calderón the winner. Only they hadn’t counted all the votes. Two million Mexicans poured into the streets to protest. Calderón’s only hope was to seduce the PRI, his right-wing party’s traditional enemy, into a coalition against the leftist PRD. In exchange for the PRI’s support, he promised that his party would bail out the PRI’s cash cow: Oaxaca.

Oaxaca is one of the poorest states in a poor nation. In 2004, the PRI installed as governor a rising star with a reputation for electoral fraud named Ulises Ruiz Ortiz. Ruiz was a cash machine, skilled at milking the state to kick funds up to the national party organization. What he wasn’t so good at, it turned out, was keeping a lid on the discontent that has been rippling across Mexico since the Zapatistas marched out of the jungle in 2004.

“If they want to kill our teachers,” Oaxaqueños declared after Ruiz’s police killed several striking teachers on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2006, “they should kill us all now.” From that day on, Oaxaca City was in open revolt. *“Con Ulises’pelotas, yo haré los huevos fritos,”* women chanted in the streets. (“With Ulises’ balls, I’m going to make fried eggs!”). It was as if Louisiana’s poor converged on New Orleans, shoved aside the political hacks and ran the city themselves for months, even as National Guardsmen drove around shooting into houses.

And yet the American press ignored Oaxaca. That made it a perfect story for Brad. Friends tried to talk him out of it. “The APPO”—the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca, in effect its revolutionary government—“doesn’t trust anyone it hasn’t known for years,” Al Giordano, the publisher of a report on Latin American politics called *Narco News*, told him. “They keep telling me not to send newcomers, because the situation is so fucking tense.”

*“I think I will go,”* Brad wrote back. When he showed up at an Indymedia headquarters in Mexico City en route to Oaxaca, they told him his white skin would make him and anyone standing near him a target.

“You’re treating me like my mom,” Brad said. “What are you made of? This is what it’s about. This is the uprising.”

John Gibling, a radical print journalist with deeper roots in Mexico, remembers Brad showing up in Oaxaca City’s central square, a tall hipster American with a fancy camera—Brad had sunk his life savings into it—that made him look like a professional. “The media painted a picture of



a gung-ho idealist who didn't know which way was which, but the guy was not clueless," says Gibler. "That first day I said, *Hey, Brad, you wanna come along to the barricades tonight?*" He looked at me, and he said, "I can't wait to get out there, but people are getting killed. I need to get a feel of the place. Walking around at night without that is not a smart move."

He found a place to sleep (the floor of the headquarters of an indigenous-rights group) and a place to stash his videotape—he'd learned from Brazil that a hiding place was a requirement for an Indymedia journalist lacking the protections of a big news agency. He ate with the APPOs, as the protesters were called, marched with them, slept on the ground beside them on hot evenings. He told them about his politics before he asked about theirs. He laughed a lot, his ridiculous guffaw. Slowly, the APPOs began to trust him. Brad was on the inside of what *Rolling Thunder*, an anarchist rag back in the States, would call "the closest our generation has come to seeing an anarchist revolution." Mexican authorities evidently agreed—they were preparing to make an example out of Oaxaca.

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Brad's footage on October 27<sup>th</sup> begins on a suburban street, strewn with rocks and sandbags, a pillar of black smoke rising in the background. Minutes before, there'd been a battle, paramilitaries with automatic weapons versus protesters with Molotov cocktails. Brad zooms in on a silver van consumed by flames. Then he cuts back to the crowd, old men in straw hats, teenagers in ski masks, big mamas with frying pans. They begin to shout. "the people, united!" Bullets pop from a side street, and the fight careens onto a narrow lane of one-story buildings. "Cover yourselves, comrades!" someone shouts. The protesters advance car by car, lobbing Molotovs that bloom from the blacktop. The sky darkens, bruised blue over green trees. A dark-skinned boy in a black tank top kneels and aims his bottle-rocket bazooka. Bullets are cracking. Brad remembers a war photographer's maxim: "Don't get greedy." That's when you get killed. He turns of his camera.

When he starts shooting again, the protesters are crouching outside a white building in which they believe a comrade is being held prisoner. They batter the door, darting out into the open to deliver drop kicks. "*Mire!*" Brad shouts. ("Look!") From down the street, more gunfire. Brad runs. Next to him someone is hit. "Shit!" Brad shouts. "Are you OK, comrade?" someone asks. Brad zooms in on an old woman fingering her prayer beads.

Then the final footage played around the globe half a million times: a red dump truck used as a barricade and a battering ram, a wounded man led away, gunfire answered by bottle rockets. "*Diganle a este pinche wey que no este tomando fotos!*" somebody shouts. ("Somebody tell this fucking guy to stop taking photos!") Brad keeps shooting. He steps up onto the sidewalk, his camera aimed dead ahead. The compañeros are crouching; Brad rises, a pale white gringo above the crowd.

"I watch this, and I say, *Brad, stop! Don't do this!*" says Miguel, the Brazilian filmmaker. "I ask myself if he really knows where he is. I ask myself if he knows he can die."

Bang—a bullet hits Brad dead center, just below his heart, exploding his aorta.

"*Ayúdeme!*" he screams. ("Help me!")

"*Tranquilo, tranquilo,*" someone says. ("Take it easy, take it easy.") A photographer gives Brad mouth-to-mouth, and he gasps and opens his eyes. There are last words, but nobody knows

what they are; the men who rush him to the hospital don't understand English, and Quebrado has forgotten how to speak his mind.

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His old girlfriend Glass was in Hawaii when she heard. She'd been e-mailing Brad a lot. She missed him, and it seemed like he missed her too. She'd been in New York right before he'd left for Oaxaca, and they'd gone on a pub crawl. He'd had a girlfriend with him, but in the pictures from that night it's Glass on Brad's arm. The day he died, she was sitting in a park, singing songs she learned from Brad. She sang the anarchist anthems, then Woody Guthrie's "Hobo Lullaby." Most of all she wanted to sing his favorite, "Angel from Montgomery." She tried to hear Brad's voice. He'd be John Prine, she'd be Bonnie Raitt.

*Just give me one thing that I can hold on to/To believe in this living is a hard way to go.*

"I have to e-mail Brad," she thought. "This is so great!" Then her phone rang. "This is Dyan, right?" a stranger's voice said. "Can you call Brad Will's mom? He's hurt."

"What? How?" The stranger wouldn't answer. "I'm not calling his mother until I know what happened," Glass said. The stranger gave Glass another number. She dialed. "I was told to call this number about Brad?" she asked.

"Yeah, it's been confirmed," said the voice on the other end, another stranger.

"What's been confirmed?"

"Oh, he's dead."

All Glass remembers after that is screaming.

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In Oaxaca, the APPOs combed Brad's long hair and dressed his body in white. They draped a gold cross around his neck and laid him in a coffin. There were no fiery speeches, just weeping. Then-president Fox used the death of the gringo as an excuse to invade Oaxaca with 4,000 federal police. The U.S. ambassador, a Bush crony from Texas, blamed the violence on schoolteachers and said that Brad's death "underscores the need for a return to law and order." In the coming months, the APPO would be crushed; Calderón would slam through a Mexican version of the Patriot Act, allowing police to tap phones and make arrests without warrants or charges; and, this past fall, the Bush administration proposed a \$1.4 billion military aid package for Calderón's regime, ostensibly to fight drugs and "terrorism."

And Brad's killers? It seemed like an open-and-shut case—a Mexican news photographer had even taken a picture of the men who appeared to be the shooters, a group of beefy thugs in plain clothes charging toward Brad and the APPOs with pistols and AR-15s. The Oaxaca state prosecutor, a Ruiz loyalist, grudgingly issued warrants for two of them, police Commander Orlando Manuel Aguilar and Abel Santiago Zárate, known as "El Chino." But at a press conference two weeks later, the prosecutor announced a new theory: Brad's murder had been a "deceitful con-fabulation" planned by the APPO. In this version of events, Brad was only grazed on the street. The fatal bullet was fired point-blank by an APPO on the way to the hospital—a physical impossibility, according to the coroner. No matter. At the end of November, a judge set the suspects free.

Last March, Brad's parents traveled to Mexico to request that the investigation be turned over to federal authorities. They won that fight, only to be fed the same story with a half dozen

variations. Believability wasn't the point. "In political crimes in Mexico," notes Gibler, who came to act as the family's translator, "there's an impeccably neat history of immediate obfuscation and destruction of evidence. The authorities immediately flood all discussion with conspiracy theory. There's a tradition of exquisite incompetence, so that later only speculation is possible."

The Wills are not, by nature, speculative people. At age sixty-eight, Hardy is a solid, fit man with white hair worn in a boyish curl. He still drives more than an hour each way every day to his factory in Rockford, Illinois. Kathy Will bounces like a loose electron around the Wisconsin lake house in which they now live. Designed and built by Brad's great-grandfather, the home is a mansion of broad, dark cypress beams, spotless, disturbed only by neat stacks of documents, arranged at the great oak dining table, like settings for a seminar on Brad's achievements as a boy, Mexican politics and ballistics.

It's on this last matter that the case still turns. If the Wills are ever to be able to say, "This is what happened, this is how Brad died, this is the man who killed him," they must determine what sort of bullet killed him and where, exactly, it came from. The initial coroner's report said the bullets were 9mm, which would rule out the .38s carried by the cops Brad filmed. But a re-examination of the evidence has revealed that the bullets were .38s after all. Hardy shows me a photograph of them, two squat slugs hardly dented. "They only passed through soft tissue," he says. But from how far away? The government says Brad was shot nearly point-blank. The Wills are certain he was shot by the policemen at the end of the street. Proving that, they believe, may start the wheels of justice turning. I've come bearing what passes for good news to the Wills these days: a frame-by-frame analysis of Brad's last minute made by his friend Warcry, who has entrusted me to act as her courier.

"This is what we've been waiting for," says Hardy. We gather in a TV room. "That's it!" Hardy exclaims. There, on the left side of the screen, above the hood of the red dump truck, in the green of the trees, a tiny white starburst appears, expands, drifts like smoke, visible for a fraction of a second, blown up into giant, pale pixels—very possible the bullet that's about to hit Brad.

"Should we watch it again?" Hardy asks. Kathy's head drops, and she backs out of the room. Rewind, pause; Brad falls down, over and over. "Yes," says Hardy quietly, "this is what we need."

He's excited, his face flushed. It's 11:30 at night. I call Warcry; she's up, waiting for the Wills' response. Hardy wants to see a still she's isolated of a man who appears to be holding a sniper rifle, more potential evidence for a long-distance kill shot. "This could really change everything!" Hardy says. We gather around his computer in his study, a dark room filled with hunting trophies and memorabilia from Hardy's Yale football days. I pull up the image, a man in a yellow shirt at a distance, a long gun barrel rising above his left shoulder. Hardy sighs. He walks over to a well-stocked gun cabinet, removes a rifle and turns around, posing perfectly as the man Warcry believes is his son's killer.

"It's not a sniper rifle," he says, looking at the gun in his hand. "It's a carbine."

The puff of white smoke is the best piece of evidence they've seen in the year since Brad died, but they still can't explain how he was shot twice at long range by such a clumsy old weapon. Hardy slumps into a seat in the corner, thinking of one more theory—one more chance at certainty—dashed.

Kathy brings us tea. Like Brad, she has soft, sleepy eyes and a broad smile. "I like talking to people," she says. "I'll talk to anyone. I guess that's where Brad got it from." Hardy is exhausted, but Kathy sits up, watching Brad's old videos—Brad fleeing tear gas in Miami, bullets in Brazil. Hardy was always the skeptical one, shielding his wife from the ways of the world, but now

it's Kathy who's gaining a worldly wisdom, grasping the roots of her son's political discontent. She still doesn't get the politics, tsk-tsks when she sees Brad sitting in front of an upside-down American flag—a crisp Stars and Stripes snaps on a pole outside the house, and there are three bands of red, white, and blue stones on her finger. It's not anything that Brad said that has changed her point of view. It's what the Mexican government says, the lies they told her to her face.

“It'd be laughable if they weren't serious,” she says. “What they're really telling me is that Brad was there for a very good reason. Believe me, I didn't want him there. But he was absolutely right. He was right about all the injustices. I didn't know it then. I really didn't know. I know it now. In spades.”

One of the most common clichés about radicalism in America is the myth that it's all about the parents, activists rebelling against or proving themselves to Mom and Dad before they settle down and become Mom or Dad. That wasn't what Brad Will was doing. Had he come through that fire-fight on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006, he probably wouldn't have mentioned it to his mother. Instead, he'd tell her about the great Mexican food he'd had, and she'd say that the lake was flattening in the cold, that soon it would be frozen, that maybe when he came home for Christmas he could go ice-skating. His footage likely would not have been seen outside activist circles in the United States, the echo chamber of the already persuaded. Yet the bullet that killed him ended up broadcasting what he had learned far beyond his usual channels, all the way back to where he'd begun. With Brad's death, knowledge came to Kathy Will. It was the most awful kind of knowing: a new understanding of the world as it is, almost blinding her to the glimpse she had caught, maybe for the first time, of the world as Brad had imagined it could be.

“The last possible *deed* is that which defines perception itself,” writes Hakim Bey in the long and wild poem that turned Brad Will on to those possibilities, “an invisible golden cord that connects us.”

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Jeff Sharlet  
Anarchist Superstar: The Revolutionary Who Filmed His Own Murder  
The Martyrdom of Brad Will  
January 24, 2008

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