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LIBRARY INCIDENT LESS VIOLENT THAN REPORTED

Matt Forsythe

Jack Travis
April 8, 2010

Rachel Schafer, senior editor
The Herald

Ms. Schafer:

I am writing in response to the CrimeNotes column in last Tuesday's *Herald*—in particular, the report about Brian Hall and his recent altercation with Scott Chambers. The article in question, "A Barrage of Books: SGA President Injured in Library Assault," presents a misleading account of Hall's arrest on April 4, 2010. As one of his housemates and a close personal friend, I protest this malicious attack on his character.

A scholar and a humanitarian, Brian embodies the best values of our beloved school. By focusing solely on his violent outburst, which sent President Chambers to the ER with a scalp wound and possible concussion, staff writer Charity Moore ignores Hall's admirable traits and contributions to social and intellectual life on campus. Therefore, to lessen the current outrage against Mr. Hall and his misguided blow to the face of the student body, I submit the following clarifications.

#1: Six Books are not a "Barrage"

Brian launched his opening salvo, the Scribner Paperback edition of *The Old Man and The Sea*, as he confronted Chambers on the fourth floor of Graves Library. This initial shot missed, sailing wide to the right. Hall reloaded from his literary arsenal before his target could react, and this round—the hardcover edition of H.R. Stoneback's *Reading Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises*—connected squarely with the president's forehead, knocking him from his chair and opening the cut

that (allegedly) required sutures and led to assault charges.¹

1 What manner of books fills our stacks, that they rip open flesh? Binding Services must be questioned.

Always persistent, Brian followed the Stoneback with two volumes of Cliffs Notes and *The Sun Also Rises*, also a Scribner Paperback. A final missile was launched at point-blank range, as Hall towered above his antagonist and cried, “Are you ready for this, asshole? You ruined my life!” *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story*,² by celebrated biographer Carlos Baker, would have dealt a devastating blow, given its scope (697 pages), but Chambers dodged this dense tome, and his trail of blood has stained both the library carpet and my friend’s dream of law school. Meanwhile, having exhausted his anger and his sources, Hall slumped to the ground and awaited his fate.

2 New York: Scribner’s, 1969

According to Merriam-Webster, a “barrage” involves “a heavy concentration of fire.” Hall flung six books at Chambers, but only one of these scholarly missiles found its target—hardly a “concentration.” Furthermore, are Cliffs Notes really “heavy”? What about *The Old Man and the Sea*? Yes, Scribner’s stretches its 27,500 words to fill 127 pages, employing the font and spacing machinations of a first-semester freshman, but isn’t the work really a novella, perhaps even a long story? Certainly this light weaponry belies the article’s title.

#2: The Real Victim is the Research

Moore claims that Hall confronted Chambers “for whispering in the quiet section.” Such flat prose lessens the intensity of the encounter. Indeed, Brian’s predicament was far more dire than the article suggests. Still reeling from a personal catastrophe, a devastating weekend that Moore failed to unearth in her so-called “investigation,” Hall was scrambling to finish an essay before its midnight deadline. This paper, an assignment for his American Literature survey,³ required him to compose “a 5-6 page, thesis-driven argument” that incorporated “two or more secondary sources.” His topic had been approved before Spring Break, but Hall lost his original notes and began that fateful evening with no more than a promising title.⁴

3 English 232: American Writing after the Civil War

4 “No Bull in this Fish Story: A Comparison-Contrast of *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Old Man and the Sea*”

Two hours later, when Chambers broke his concentration, Brian had already

completed 483 of the 1500 words required. His promising efforts included the following thesis: “Santiago serves as partner to the fish, but the bullfighters and fishermen in *The Sun Also Rises* have a more violent (hostile?) connection to their prey. This contrast is also reflected in the human relationships within the two books as well. Both involve people and nature animals, but the most vicious predator is the human spirit.”⁵ By omitting these humanizing details, the article downplays Hall’s immersion in Hemingway’s fiction, a focused meditation that Chambers so rudely disrupted. True, a breach of library etiquette does not excuse turning books into weapons—the pen is mightier than the sword, after all—but readers should understand that Hall is a scholar, not a villain.⁶

⁵ When presented with Brian’s draft, his TA observed, “He was supposed to compare *The Sun Also Rises* to our readings about Modernism—we didn’t even talk about *The Old Man and the Sea*.” She explained that the fishing excursion is the real contrast to the bullfights in Pamplona, but refused to speculate about a potential grade: “at least he read the book.”

⁶ Upon cross-examination, Brian admitted that he stopped reading *The Sun Also Rises* during the “boring” descriptions of fishing and picnics. He anticipated the bullfights from “that blurry picture on the cover” and supplemented the topic with *The Old Man and the Sea* at the last minute because our high school English teacher loved that book and even hung a Florida Marlins poster on the classroom wall.

#3: The Question is the Answer

The article omits the primary clue to Hall’s irregular behavior. President Chambers did far more than whisper to Lauren Cook: he whispered a question, “Are You Ready?” This striking detail is the piece of the puzzle *The Herald* has overlooked.

Cook raised her head and delivered the pre-arranged response: “I’m Ready for Anything.” On the surface, the exchange sounds vulgar, implying an indecent use of library facilities. However, as Chambers, Cook, and Hall each knew, this call-and-response was actually a password, the traditional invitation to join The Phalanx, an exclusive, powerful, and secret organization that haunts the shadows of our school.⁸

⁸ (Allegedly) an offshoot of Yale’s infamous Skull and Bones, The Phalanx was founded in 1923, with rumors of similar chapters in colleges and universities throughout the Southeast. Its members, referred to as Hoplites, include officers in student government, captains of athletic teams, and high-profile individuals throughout the student body. Following the directives of the school’s administration, they operate behind the scenes “for the welfare and preservation of the institution and its traditions.” Rumored activities include scheming, fundraising, surveying and manipulating

student opinion, suppressing the proletariat, networking with alumni, happy hours at the East Street Brewery, and vision quests at the retreat center on Eagle Lake.

Potential inductees are invited (“tapped”) to join the ranks of The Phalanx in the following sacred, time-honored ritual: i) Senior Hoplites approach the target from behind, tap them on the shoulder, and ask, “Are you ready?” ii) If prepared to endure the Night of Trials and join their ranks, the inductee must answer, without hesitation, “I’m ready for anything.” iii) He (or she, since 1974) is then blindfolded and immediately led on an elaborate, night-long initiation.*

Advocates for The Phalanx emphasize its positive influence. Specific projects are difficult to pinpoint, but they supposedly include the new South Campus entrance (note the Grecian influence in the landscaping); the town hall meetings to promote dialogue among students, faculty, and administrators; plans for a “campus hub” for career services and student organizations, and the upcoming performance by Kenny Chesney. Opponents counter with the unchecked influence of a manipulative, elitist organization, a tendency to encourage rumors and conspiracy, and the aforesaid concert by the country superstar.

*Due to safety concerns—in particular, allowing a stranger to blindfold and abduct you for the evening—targets are now pre-informed** of their imminent abduction and place themselves, during the week of initiation (“The Long Watch”), in one of the many locations on campus with links to Phalanx lore, including the Campus Dining Center with the Chik-Fil-A (look for the Doric pillars on the exterior), the nature trail behind the Environmental Science building, and the fourth floor of the library, home of the Classics volumes and one of the quietest, most secluded sections of the stacks.

**Though well-versed in Hoplite tradition, Brian had overlooked (or ignored) this critical development, believing that he soon would be asked the life-altering question, despite no indication that a bid was forthcoming.

#4: An Evolving Obsession

Moore states that Hall was annoyed by the disruption itself, ignoring his infatuation with The Phalanx since he first arrived on campus. He despised the group at first. When the Dining Center ran out of chicken nuggets his freshman year, Brian blamed the shortfall on a Hoplite gathering that evening and documented his outrage in a letter to *The Herald*.⁹

⁹“Nugget Nonsense: A Modest Proposal to Dissolve The Phalanx” (10/13/08)

Such behavior was familiar to Hall’s friends from high school, who testify to his longstanding need for recognition and fear of being excluded. “Brian loves to join clubs and organizations, especially if a leadership position is involved,” said Will

Trisdale, a former classmate at Carver County and current roommate. This behavior intensified as a college student. Hall participated in intramural sports, volunteered with the College Dance-a-Thon, and boasts ties to amateur theater. He traveled to Atlanta with Habitat for Humanity and talked about founding a local chapter of the FDA, the Future Dentists of America, before deciding that law school was a better fit for his talents.

Last fall, at the start of his junior year, Brian's roommates noticed a shift in his stance. "I was trying to bait him," explained Jared Knox, "blaming the ticket shortage for the Auburn game on those damned Hoplites. But the son-of-a-bitch actually defended The Phalanx, claiming it wasn't as bad as its reputation." His portfolio of Facebook friends exploded, including an exponential surge in campus leaders. "He was working his way toward some inner circle," Eric Wilson noted. "One night, in his trash, I found a paper that listed his activities and awards and compared them to other students, all with code names from *The Odyssey*."

Hall's routines changed as well. He ate more frequently at the Chik-Fil-A, took evening strolls on the nature trail, and studied exclusively on the fourth floor of the library. He camped there for hours, returning at one in the morning to complain about our lack of motivation. "God forbid you were playing Xbox and drinking a beer when he arrived," recalled Wilson. "We were cock-blocking his invitation, his slacker friends, a stain on his reputation."

Brian's irritation grew with his anxiety, according to Knox, "always bitching about the dishes in the sink and the message it sent—god, he became such a pain in the ass."

"Remember the day Sara Gaines was tapped?" asked Trisdale. "You spotted her leaving the library in a blindfold and raced home to tell him? Shit. Brian exploded, slamming her shameless self-promotion and mediocre fundraising for the Dance-a-Thon."¹⁰

¹⁰ "Don't get me wrong," Trisdale added. "Brian's a decent friend. It's just . . . don't quote me on this, but he can be a real tool."

#5: A Jury of His Peers

Given the tension within the apartment, a mounting hostility that Moore overlooked, is it surprising that his roommates were plotting their revenge? Imagine their schemes, the convenience of April Fool's Day, the simplicity of it all. How easy it was to approach Brian in the library in Halloween masks, tapping his

shoulder and asking that long-awaited question: “Are You Ready?”

“I’m Ready for Anything!” He nearly clocked Will’s jaw, leaping to accept the blindfold.

The bar crawl that followed was the stuff of legends. Their intentions were even noble: get Brian smashed, humiliate his ego a little, and remind him who his true friends were.

The night required rituals, or the charade wouldn’t work. Eager to prove his worth, Brian expected nothing less than an elaborate initiation. If anything, our schemes were juvenile and uninspired, a far cry from the rites of passage that he was steeled to endure. We shaved his head —always a given, once he began styling his hair with product—and claimed his eyebrows for good measure.

The rest? Everything seems a bit silly in print, especially in retrospect, given what transpired. Brian learned secret (i.e. vulgar) handshakes, completed an embarrassing challenge at each stop, and encouraged strangers to Sharpie his face and body with middle fingers, phone numbers, profanity and insults (including every synonym for “douchebag” that we knew), not to mention a wide selection of pornographic drawings—most notably, an elaborate portrait of Big Bird and Mr. Snuffleupagus in a compromised position with our beloved sailor mascot.

If anything, we showed restraint. There was nothing sexual, nothing violent, nothing like the traumatic shame in inductions described on the internet. Nothing that left a permanent scar. We considered a tattoo, but deemed it too much, even for Brian.

Things got out of control, the nature of the beast when shots are involved. Hence the spontaneous trip to the Humanities Plaza, transforming its trademark fountain into a pool of bubbles with dish soap. Brian himself made the audible to remove his clothes for a skinny dip, culminating in his scandalous, infamous pose with the wood nymph at its center.¹¹

¹¹ The photos were never supposed to make it online —not the worst of them, at least. They were leverage, blackmail, a nuclear option if Hall failed to reform.

When the campus police arrived, our band of brothers scattered to the wind. The naked bather was shit-out-of-luck, slick with bubbles and scrambling to find his pants.

#6: Hasn't He Suffered Enough?

Hall woke the next morning in the city jail, his bald head cold and throbbing, confused at his piss-soaked trousers, the smudged messages covering his flesh, and his lack of eyebrows. He could anticipate the fine for public intoxication, but not the indecency charge, the nude shenanigans that now must be reported on grad school applications.

He missed a critical meeting for his group project in Political Science; messages from partners filled his inbox, threats about the participation points he'll lose. Plans to finish his Macroeconomics assignment were also ruined, and the professor doesn't accept late work, another hit to his GPA. Good-bye, Dean's List. Good-bye, tier-one schools.

Pictures from his epic night would shortly appear on Facebook, a Sunday gift to his parents, sister, pastor, and (soon-to-be-ex) girlfriend.

What's more—what's saddest of all, really—he still believed he joined The Phalanx.

Therefore, citizen-readers, before you dismiss Brian Hall as a deranged lunatic, a violent skinhead who deserves the expulsion that's likely in his future, consider his full situation on that fateful Tuesday night. Because I want to set the record straight, distancing him from the shoddy reporting of “staff writer” Moore and the sensation-loving editors at *The Herald*. Thirty seconds should not negate thirty months of scholarship and service.

Because you haven't met my friend. Can you imagine his regret that evening, slaving away on his essay, bald and single and a court date looming? In the quiet of the library, he overheard that bitter question, the answer he once longed to utter himself, now given by an undeserving rival.

Admit it, you finally understand his reaction. Let's be honest—you'd be ready, too.

Cheers,
Jack Travis
Class of '11

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