

Herta Hilscher-Wittgenstein, Survival Barn
Elm Ridge Rd. Princeton, N.J.
08540 Dec. 28, 1974

Dear Laura Gilpin:

Instead of sending
Christmas cards, I have
made xerox copies of
an article I read and
which really moved
me.

I am not ashamed to ad-
mit that I cried, when
I was finished reading
it. It got me thinking
— and isn't this the
what we are all doing
at the change of the
year?

With best wishes and
kind regards, H.H.W.

Remembering René

By Ted Morgan

The New York Times Magazine/November 11, 1973

Twenty-two-year-old Veronica, lanky and light-skinned, raised on Chicago's South Side by a white mother and a black father, is a ghetto-wise college dropout who works in a Boston youth center where teen-agers found guilty of felonies are sent as an alternative to prison. She was on the job on Oct. 4 after missing a day, and one of the kids asked:

"Hey, Bones, where you been?"

"Well, I had some problems," Veronica said.

"What's on your mind?"

"My friend was murdered."

"Oh, was that your friend? I saw it on the news.

Yeah, man, I know she was your friend, but a honkie is a honkie. What was she doin' over there?"

"You tell me," Veronica said. "She was livin' there. So who's got the problem?"

Two days earlier, on Oct. 2, Veronica had been expecting her friend René Wagler to pick her up at work, but René was busy driving other people around and Veronica got home on her own. Home was a rented 10-room clapboard house, red with a white porch, at 15 Wayne Street, a quiet, tree-lined enclave of middle-class comfort in the heart of Boston's black ghetto. Six dedicated feminists lived there in a racially mixed collective of three white women, René, Kathy and Karen, and three black women, Veronica, Demita and Nicky.

All the women but René had moved from Chicago to Boston in August, and those who had found jobs supported those who were still looking. René, a short, fresh-faced, energetic woman of 24, with clipped brown hair and traces of an accent from her native Germany, had arrived on Sept. 28 after a three-month detour in Pennsylvania, working as a housepainter and carpenter on a farm.

One of the ways René's feminism expressed itself was that she changed her given name, Evelynne, to a man's name, which she used in identification papers like her driver's license. She also adopted a trade that has been restricted to men since Jesus Christ—she gave her occupation as that of carpenter.

In Pennsylvania, Veronica said, "René worked her car off for \$400 and wheels." She arrived at the house on Wayne Street with a major contribution to the collective's mobility—a 1966 Rambler station wagon. When Veronica got home from work that Tuesday afternoon, Oct. 2, she said, "René was sawing a board, and Demita, the other woman I live with, was cooking spaghetti." Demita is a slight, intense woman who paints and dances and is considered the expert on the history of the feminist movement.

Kathy, snub-nosed, saucer-eyed, with short, straw-colored hair, who had worked in Chicago as a cab driver, was in suburban Watertown looking for a job. She called the house to say she didn't have any carfare and could someone come and get

her? René told her to hold on. Demita managed to come up with some change. There was a quarter of a tank of gas in the car, and René put in another dollar's worth, but try getting around Boston when you've been there five days. Even with Veronica along, they got lost, and René said they'd better start back or they'd get stuck.

As René turned the corner at Elm Hill and Seaver, four blocks from their house, the car died, in the middle of the intersection. Three young black men helped them push it to the side, and René and Veronica walked home.

Veronica was tired, she'd worked that day, so she collapsed on the living-room couch and turned on the TV. René, who always had to be doing something, went to fix a lock on the back door. Later, Veronica caught a glimpse of René leaving the house with a two-gallon gasoline can and heard the front door slam. She was wearing bluejeans, a blue work shirt with a youth club insignia, and mid-calf boots.

René walked down Wayne Street and turned left on Blue Hill Avenue, the main thoroughfare in that section of the black belt, which cuts through Boston from Back Bay, through Roxbury and North Dorchester, along Franklin Park, to the edge of Mattapan. It is here that the overwhelming majority of Boston's 105,000 blacks, 16.3 per cent of the total population, live. Blue Hill Avenue is the lower colon of the Boston body geographic. "Urban decay" is a euphemism for this collection of abandoned buildings with boarded-up windows, trash-strewn tenements, stores grilled and shackled as though under siege, dingy diners, and men huddled in doorways with hands in pockets and heads bent. Occasionally, one sees an affluent citizen, like the man wearing shades and a broad-brimmed leather hat who was driving a late-model Cadillac with this message in white scroll letters on the door: "If it feels good, do it."

Ten years ago, this was a middle-class white neighborhood, but today, the few remaining whites are the elderly and the homeowners who would have to sell at a loss. Today the area is beset by low income and high crime rate, with the familiar byproducts of prostitution and drugs. It is part of a dispiriting ghetto landscape that Boston has no patent on, where people complain about police calls going unanswered, and where a white person of either sex should think twice about walking alone at night.

It was not that René was intrepid. As one of the women said, "She didn't Bogart her way through any situation." It was just that she refused to accept the fact that she couldn't go for a walk in her neighborhood. What did she have to do with the racial tensions that have been building up over the

years in Boston, and with the increasingly insistent black complaints that the racial imbalance laws were being flouted, that the police and fire departments were lily-white, and that blacks weren't safe in white neighborhoods like South Boston and Charlestown? What did she have to do with pockets of bigotry, and people locked into stereotypes, like the black kid who sees the Irish kid living in South Boston with his drunken father, the Irish kid who sees the black kid living in Roxbury on welfare with no father?

Her husband, Mark, says René knew about racial hostility, and thought she could cope with it. But she may not have realized that in a deteriorating situation in a predominantly black neighborhood, skin color becomes an incitement. There is a law of horizontal hostility, that a white person who happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time becomes a surrogate victim for the one the black is really trying to get at, Mr. Charlie, the one with his foot on his neck.

René had come to Boston for one reason, to join her friends in the women's collective. To several of the women, discouraged with Mayor Daley's Chicago and conditions in the South Side ghetto, Boston held out the promise of a better life. They thought it must be a more humane, more tolerant city. Boston was the capital of the only state that had voted for McGovern, the state that had bred the magical Kennedy family. It was the cradle of great liberal universities. It was where Martin Luther King had gone to school. The women had created a myth of Boston, out of popular imagery and personal experience. Veronica said: "It was like a place a little bit better, a little more caring, where we could get our heads together . . . I had one good experience at N. I. U. (Northern Illinois University), I had a roommate from Massachusetts who really turned me on, she was a soulful woman, she drove all the way to 75th and Dante on the South Side of Chicago for my 20th-birthday party. That meant a lot to me."

This was not the first time that René had gone out alone at night. The night before, on Monday, she had taken an exploratory stroll up Blue Hill Avenue to Franklin Park. As she passed a tenement, three young blacks on a stoop called out: "Hey honkie, get out."

René stopped, went up to the stoop, and asked: "Why?" She spoke with an accent. She was asked: "Where you from?"

"Germany," she said.

"What's that make you?"

"White."

"Get out of this part of town."

Now, if I were walking along Blue Hill Avenue and someone called me a honkie and told me to get out, I would not pursue the conversation. René did. Veronica explained: "When René was hassled on the South Side, she would confront that person and say, 'Why did you call me that? I'm just as powerless as you are.' People don't know how to deal with honesty, especially in the what-are-you-doing-in-my-territory type of thing."

The following night, shortly before 9 P.M., René walked down Blue Hill Avenue, past St. Hugh's Church, which is kept locked most of the time because young blacks urinate in the confessionals,

past the office building with the engraved letters over the door saying City of Boston, Overseers of the Public Welfare, until she reached the Anchor gas station where she filled her 2-gallon can.

Carrying the gas back to her stalled car up Blue Hill Avenue, René passed a row of four-story orange brick tenements. Running along the side of the last building, at 505 Blue Hill, is a narrow alley that leads to a small, rubble-strewn yard, overlooked by back porches.

It was there that René ran into the three young blacks she had talked to on the previous evening, plus three others. They dragged her down the alley and into the yard. She was forced to pour the two gallons of gasoline she was carrying over herself. A match flickered in the dark, and René, her clothes and skin soaked with gasoline, was set on fire. Anyone who has seen Buddhist self-immolations on television will have some idea of what happens to the human body when it becomes a gasoline-soaked torch.

René rolled on the ground and threw dirt over herself. No one came to her aid. She ran down Blue Hill Avenue, away from Wayne Street, and walked into the Friendly Liquor Store. The night clerk, Fred Prince, recalled that "she looked like something you don't want to see, like a piece of off material that was still smoking and burning around the edges. You could only tell she was a woman by her breasts."

"Somebody please call an ambulance," René said. She turned around and went back into the street. Two black customers pulled the rest of her clothing off and one threw his jacket over her shoulders.

At 9:37 P.M. a passing police cruiser saw the commotion, picked René up, and took her to Boston City Hospital. For five hours a team of doctors under the chief resident in surgery, Dr. Joseph Lenahan, tried to save her.

"When she came in," Dr. Lenahan recalled, "she was alert and awake and talking and seemed like a very pleasant young woman. That's frequently the way it is with burn cases, complications don't arise for several hours. She had very extensive third degree burns, covering 90 per cent of her body, from below her knees, and including her back, front, head, neck and face. Her hair was burned off. They were char-type burns. If you had not been able to see her feet you could not have told whether she was black or white."

"She received standard treatment. Massive doses of I.V. [intravenous] fluids—with no skin surface left you get a lot of fluid loss—and her body was coated with a special preparation. She developed some respiratory trouble, and we had to perform a trach [tracheotomy, cutting open the windpipe], and put tubes down her throat and into her lungs to keep her breathing. In cases like this, the mortality rate is 100 per cent. Her burns were so extensive that if she had survived it would have made medical history."

At midnight, Lieut. Jerome P. McCullum of the homicide squad was allowed to question René, and made a tape of the conversation. It must have been the first time that McCullum had ever run across a woman carpenter, and his wonder was great. "What is your job," he asked René.

"Carpenter."

"What?"

"Carpenter."

"Oh, you mean a carpenter by trade."

McCullum held out some mug shots and asked René whether she could identify them. The voice on the tape said: "I can't open my eyes."

René briefly told McCullum what had happened. Soon, her voice weakened, the words were mumbled, and she said: "I really don't want to talk any more."



TWO hours later, René was dead. Her body was taken across the street to the Mallory Institute of Pathology, otherwise known as the morgue, where it was refrigerated until arrangements could be made with next of kin.

The following day, Lieutenant McCullum went to see René's friends on Wayne Street. McCullum is a genial, shrewd, white-haired but youthful-faced veteran of the Boston police force. I somehow doubt that the Women's Lib movement is one of his main areas of sympathetic interest. Conversely, to the women in the collective, cops are one of the purest incarnations of male chauvinism. McCullum's lines might have been written by Ed McBain. When one of the women showed him a photograph of René, a pretty, fresh-faced, smiling young woman, he said: "Well, she's not pretty now." He played the tape, explaining: "She can't talk too well, she has tubes running down her throat." When he got to the part of the tape where René said she couldn't open her eyes, one of the women broke down. Before McCullum would play any more of the tape, he said: "I'm only going to let you hear this tape if you promise not to get emotional."

Two days after the attack on René, a 65-year-old retired contractor and lifelong Boston resident named Louis Barba, who was fishing in Pleasure Bay pond in back of the low-income housing project at Columbia Point, was killed by a gang of black youths who first stoned him and then stabbed him with his own fishing knife. Two days after that, Kirk Miller, a handsome, long-haired 20-year-old who was working as a cab driver to raise college tuition, was found stabbed to death in a Roxbury vacant lot. The crimes were not connected, but to Boston's white majority, it seemed that the blacks were having a "get Whitey" week. In its restrained way, the Boston police allowed that the murders had "racist overtones."

Mayor Kevin White called a press conference and said René's death was "a case of isolated insanity," and "one of the most horrible crimes in our history." He offered a \$5,000 reward for information leading to the killers. The F.B.I. entered the investigation under a Federal law prohibiting the coercion or intimidation of any person seeking to rent or buy a house. Federal agents, plainclothesmen, and members of the tactical force in unmarked cars, all

converged on the Grove Hall neighborhood where René had been killed. Newspapers called it the biggest Boston manhunt in years. A neighborhood association called for an 11 P.M. curfew.

The way René died was linked to the film "Fuzz," shown on A.B.C.-TV two days before she was attacked. "Fuzz" shows some white delinquents on the Boston waterfront dousing tramps with gasoline and setting them on fire. Cause and effect in René's death are impossible to determine until an arrest has been made (as this article went to press, there still had been no arrests). There are, however, two relevant facts: Studies have shown that poor blacks watch the tube more than other groups, and that young people imitate what they see on TV. I have been personally convinced of this ever since my 4-year-old nephew, who was wont to walk around the house with his arms stretched out in front of him after watching Superman, went through a storm door and needed 12 stitches in his forehead.

The murders and the manhunt affected reactions to René's death in several ways. The black people of Roxbury were not repentant, they were angry. The attention paid to René's death seemed a further example of inequality. As a young woman in Franklin Park put it: "Look how the white establishment is coming down on this white girl who got burned. When somebody offs a black dude, it's just another nigger."

Percy Wilson, director of the Roxbury community center, which depends on the contributions of big corporations like Polaroid for its support, felt the same way. "When a black youth was shot to death in a heavily white South Boston housing project, do you think it got national attention, or that the Mayor put up a reward, or that the F.B.I. came into the case? We ain't apologizing any goddam longer."

Mr. Wilson said police were harassing the people of Roxbury. "They stopped a member of our staff four times in one night because he was black and had his hair braided—he looked to them like the kind who would have done it."

There was a closing of ranks on Blue Hill Avenue. In the Columbia Point killing, three teen-agers were arrested, but in René's death, the investigation was at a standstill. The community seemed to be saying: As long as blacks are unwelcome in white neighborhoods, whites will be unwelcome in black neighborhoods. It's too bad that it had to be a girl who had only been here five days, but that was her lookout.

There was also a feeling of reverse pride, or, as Percy Wilson put it: "If we're going to be accused of being one of the worst communities in the city, let us do it alone. If we're going to die, let us die alone." A practical element of this feeling may be the political advantage of developing all-black voting blocks, a lesson learned from the Irish. But the basic feeling seemed borrowed from Paradise Lost: better to reign in hell than serve in heaven. Perhaps the feeling that integration has failed, and that blacks must live in ghettos with bad housing and worse schools and make the best of it, filtered down to the street level where it was translated by teen-age hoodlums as "get Whitey out."

A week after René's death, I was sitting across from Lieutenant McCullum at Boston police headquarters. "At Columbia Point someone came forward, a concerned citizen," he said. "In this case no one has come forward yet. I find it very hard to believe. It's very well lighted there, and it was a respectable hour of night. There were new sidewalks. Have you ever seen new sidewalks at night, Ted? The cement is so white it almost reflects. Someone must have seen it! Between you and me and the wall, what we need is a concerned citizen, we can't have a cop on every street corner."

I could have told the lieutenant what Percy Wilson had told me: "Why should we come forth when a white person is killed? If I'd seen it I would have tried to stop it because I know that black people killing a white girl would get the maximum penalty, that would be my only concern."

At 15 Wayne Street, the five remaining girls, Demita, Veronica, Karen, Kathy and Nicky, were going through some changes. They had deliberately moved into Boston's black ghetto, because, as Karen, a pretty 20-year-old woman with short black hair and granny glasses who had found work as a printer, said: "Like, we had an understanding, we didn't want to live with just white people. People had told me how bad Roxbury was but I felt I could deal with it. Also, I was amazed at a house this size for so little money—\$350 a month."

"If this hadn't happened I would have continued to feel very comfortable, but this stirred up a lot of —; people are rapping when we go by. We've become too visible. I'm here because I want to be, but I'm not out to prove anything. Maybe it can still be a good thing, but like I say, I'm scared."

Veronica nodded vigorously and added: "Maybe I'm ready for the ghetto but the ghetto isn't ready for me. Now verbal abuse is happening to me, and I'm black. Not only 'honkie,' but 'what can I do for you, sir?'"

Nicky, a Haitian girl who came to the United States three years ago, deserted the collective about a week after René's death. "Fear sums the whole thing up," Veronica explained. Now, they were trying to decide whether to stay or go.



THE chain of circumstances that brought René to Blue Hill Avenue on Oct. 2 to meet her executioners, involving such disparate coincidental elements as a stalled car, the feminist movement, and the myth of Boston as a better place to live in the minds of two young women, began in the Swiss village of Langau, near Berne, in February, 1965. It was there, at a weekend youth conference, that 20-year-old Mark Wagler met 16-year-old Evelyn Adolph. Mark was the son of

Mennonite Ohio farmers, brought up in the stern faith of that Protestant sect, which was founded in Switzerland in the 16th century on the premise that the Reformation had not gone far enough. Mennonites, also known as Amish and Anabaptists, believe in simple ways of living and dressing, and are forbidden to go to war or to hold an office that requires the use of force.

Mark had graduated from Kent State University and was doing graduate work in history at the University of Berne. Evelyn Adolph was German-born but when she was 11, she moved to Switzerland, where her mother had married a worker in a paper mill. Evelyn had finished junior high school and was working in a Geneva orphanage. As Mark told me when I spent an afternoon with him in northeast Chicago a little more than a week after his wife's death, he was first drawn to "an alertness, an independence, even in the way she dressed, she was the only one wearing slacks." They had in common an involvement in fundamental Christianity. René at that time was going to Salvation Army meetings. They saw each other regularly, Mark met her mother and stepfather, and when his year in Berne was up they corresponded.

Mark had a scholarship at the University of Chicago and started doing community work in the spring of 1966 for a Mennonite church in Woodlawn, a neighborhood that was mostly black with a sprinkling of university people. Evelyn had come to the United States in December, 1965, thanks to one of Mark's married sisters, who signed an affidavit promising her a job.

When she arrived in Chicago, Mark was in the process of dropping out of school to do community work. Evelyn found a job as a nurse's aide. They decided to have a baby, and, when Evelyn was pregnant, they decided to marry. Marriage was their first surrender to convention. "Externally," Mark explained, "it made it easier to relate to the community. Although we fought the system in many other ways, in this case we didn't. In March, 1967, we had a very powerful wedding, with songs and poems, and a terrific community response."

Their son was christened Jörg Rama Thoreau, Jörg for a fiery Anabaptist minister, Rama for the hero of the Indian epic "Ramayana," who is still worshiped as an incarnation of the God Vishnu, and Thoreau for the author of "Walden." In 1968 and 1969, Mark worked as a graduate assistant at Kent State, took part in a demonstration, and was arrested. During 1968 René worked on her English—she had arrived speaking virtually none; the next year she was a part-time student, taking courses in English, French, German literature and art history.

They moved back to Chicago, lived in an urban commune, and, in Mark's words, "we went through a lot of changes. One of the most important things for René was reading Simone de Beauvoir's autobiography and 'The Second Sex,' which she started in 1967. We went through a lot of struggles with

that; she was determined not to be a member of the second sex. She began to read all kinds of women's material, she stayed with it, she was self-programed.

"In 1969 she and I stopped living together as husband and wife. She went to San Francisco for several months and then came back to Chicago and moved to a communal house. She wanted to go out on her own, relate to other women, be friends with other women. When I say she loved women, I don't say there was no other love, she loved me too, but she chose to focus on women. She felt she could communicate more honestly with women. She found men much more limiting. Regardless of the image you have of Lesbians, you should see this as a continuous struggle to grow, to find meaning and joy."

Mark took care of Rama, and René moved to a women's commune, and then shared an apartment with one other woman in the fall of 1970. Last summer, René spent weekends with Rama on a farm in Wisconsin. She was wonderful with the 6-year-old boy, Mark said, and they spent hours in the countryside gathering wild plants and mushrooms.

Mark and René remained close friends, and wrote one another often. René told Mark she was joining a collective in Boston, and that, if things worked out, she would come back and get Rama. Mark felt that was a good idea, because Rama had begun to miss his mother.

On Oct. 3, Lieutenant McCullum called Mark and told him his wife had been murdered. "Is there anything we can do," he asked?

"Yes, there is something you can do," Mark replied. "Be kind."

"Hey," Lieutenant McCullum said, "that's what she said, that she didn't want to prosecute."

What to make of all of this? These people, these situations, escape definition. Mark, tall and pony-tailed, with clear, direct blue eyes, could without appearing ridiculous portray the evangelist he was named after. Steeped in Thoreau, Eastern philosophy and his own Mennonite faith, his life has been a pursuit of simple goals, nonviolence and communal living, which he sees as a sharing, not only of possessions, but of feelings and vision.

Mark and René were after the true American dream: not the cornucopia, but the dream of living deliberately. Not the illusion that appliances make you happy, but the perhaps equally illusory idea that you can keep growing, improving, developing, and that Pandora's box is full of flowers. Mark and René went on a voyage of self-discovery that led to their estrangement and to René's particularly unpleasant death in a black ghetto of Boston. And after this had been done to her, René was faithful to the dream and told the police not to prosecute.

Nonviolent Mark was angry when he saw newspaper headlines that said: "She was killed by the people she was trying to help." "That wasn't it," he said, "she wasn't simply political or

a social worker, the racial question was just part of a situation we were living in. Her social anger was all connected, it concerned women, blacks, prisons, Puerto Ricans, it was an anger against social oppression wherever she saw it. It came out of her own sense of oppression as a woman. You can struggle against these things in many different ways, in causes and demonstrations, in private anguish, or in the way you live your life. René was not a joiner, not a mass person, she was simply living her life."

There is no lesson or moral here. The closest I can come to one is to call René a "new casualty," that is, someone who died, not in the defense of a cause, but in the performance of a life-style. She was not the victim of an adversary force—for the youths who attacked her were after the honkie, not the person—but of her own idea of herself, which took her on dangerous ground.

Mark quoted a passage from "Walden," which he felt expressed the whole way she lived, the struggle, the determination, the constant effort: "I went into the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. . . . I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it. . . or if it were sublime, to know it by experience."

Once the legal arrangements had been made, René was cremated in Boston and her ashes were flown to Madison, Wis. Near Madison, a family that Mark and René had known now own a farm. On the day after the ashes arrived, a few of René's friends who had gathered at the farm scattered the ashes from a hilltop and sang the American Indian chant "Witchie tai-tai." Later, a group of about 60 persons formed a circle on the hill and held an improvised ceremony. Small bells were passed around the circle. The women who had known René told what they remembered about her, and spoke of the continuing struggle they faced. When Rama's turn came, he said: "I was going to live with my mommy this fall. She was going to take care of me."

Then they stood and held hands and sang this verse by the Incredible String Band:

*May the long-time sun shine upon you,
All love surround you,
And the pure light within you
Guide your way home. ■*