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### Leftovers: A Search for the Freegan Ideal

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LEFTOVERS:

A SEARCH FOR THE FREEGAN IDEAL

By

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B.A., Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA 2004

Professional Paper

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I wanted another piece of bread, and I wanted it bad . . . “Shit!” I muttered to myself, “To think of all the bread we’ve thrown into the garbage can!” . . . I worked myself into a fine fury. All because there wasn’t an extra crust of bread in the house. Idiotic! Thoroughly idiotic! In my delirium I began to dwell on malted milk shakes, and how, in America, there was always an extra glassful waiting for you in the shaker. That extra glassful was tantalizing. In America there was always more than you needed, not less. -- *Henry Miller, Quiet Days in Clichy, 1934*

## Leftovers A Search for the Freegan Ideal

**Education leads to liberation.  
Driving = \$\$\$ NO OIL WAR.  
What does capitalism make people value?  
Only anarchists are pretty.  
Consider reconsidering your pacifism. Read Endgame by Derrick Jensen.**

So goes the graffiti scrawled on the brick wall inside the women’s restroom in Bauhaus, a coffee shop in Seattle’s Capitol Hill neighborhood. Like most of the eight million or so other coffee shops in the area, Bauhaus is filled with people twittering away the middle part of the day on laptops and insulating themselves against the weather with a steady supply of hot beverages. Outside in the cold rain skinny boys saunter by in skinny jeans, plaid jackets and bright cartoon-like sneakers. On the corner a homeless man in camouflage pants is panhandling, apparently unsuccessfully. I watch as he approaches a group of three young women waiting to cross the street. When one of them turns her empty pockets inside out and shrugs at him with a sheepish “Sorry!” face, he charges after them in jerky, angry movements.

I’m trying my best to fight off the black cloud of irony I feel descending upon me, which is difficult given that I’m sitting in a coffee shop filled with anti-capitalist graffiti that sells Kool-Aid and Ding-Dongs at Lord knows what kind of mark-up, and where, at

the moment, Boston's "More Than a Feeling" is playing at an uncomfortable volume. I came in here to warm up after walking around in the rain for hours, trying to reacquaint myself both geographically and spiritually with the city I left 14 months earlier in a mood that can only be described as apocalyptic. This mood left me shortly after I left the city, and yet I can already feel it seeping back into my bones along with the cold, wet air.

In many ways Seattle is an incredibly beautiful place, nestled between the snow-capped Cascade and Olympic mountain ranges, with some large, glittering body of water – Lake Union, Lake Washington, Elliot Bay, Puget Sound – never too far away. Living up to its moniker "The Emerald City," Seattle truly does stay green year-round. It has an outstanding public library system, a well-educated populace (of the city's residents over the age of 25, 53 percent hold a bachelor's degree or higher vs. a national average of 24 percent) and an impressive array of cultural offerings for a city its size – a century-old symphony orchestra, opera and ballet companies, a thriving indie music and film scene. And yet there always seems to be something sinister lurking beneath the surface here, a sort of paranoia, the sense that things are not quite what they seem.

A billboard sponsored by the National Multiple Sclerosis Society alerts me that the Pacific Northwest has a higher rate of MS than anywhere else on Earth. "Is it the SOIL?" they want to know.

A man on an overpass above the I-5 interchange sits inside a sodden sleeping bag nursing a 40-ounce bottle of Olde English.

A hot pink flyer plastered onto the schedule board at a bus stop reads: "Stonewall was a police riot. Queer and trans people say NO NEW JAIL!"

At the intersection of Denny and Lenora a man stands holding a cardboard sign that reads: “Hard Times. Anything helps.” The lettering has begun to run in the rain. Nobody stops.

Two women come out of a Subway restaurant in Belltown, one of them shouting loud enough that I can hear her half a block away. “I ain’t got no fuckin’ money! I’m broke!”

“I know,” her friend shouts back. “You always broke.”

Outside a Walgreen’s I buy a copy of Real Change, Seattle’s homeless newspaper, for a dollar. The woman who sells it to me looks slightly crazed, but seems happy as a clam. “Keep smiling,” she tells me. “It looks good with your eyes.” A message on the bottom of the paper, I notice later, informs me: “Your vendor buys this paper for 35 cents and keeps all the proceeds. Please purchase from badged vendors only.” I’m not sure whether or not my vendor had a badge, and am not sure, either, why it matters.

I pass a gay bar called R Place and stop to copy down the sign posted on its door.

**We welcome everyone as long as you are not:**

**A homophobe**

**A racist**

**A bigot**

**A drug dealer**

**A minor**

**A loud mouth**

**A drunk, or**

**An asshole**

**Or if you plan on causing problems, please stay away. If none of this applies to you, have a good time!!**

As I'm scribbling this in my little notebook a man comes up behind me, looks over my shoulder and then up at the sign. "Loud mouth!" he says before dissolving into giggles. In his hand is an open can of Steel Reserve.

A few doors down I pass a furniture shop called Area 51. I peek in the window and see a white leather chair and ottoman with a price tag of \$2,380.

\* \* \*

The next day I head to Wallingford, a neighborhood skirting the north shore of Lake Union that separates the University District from Fremont, the precinct perhaps best known for the sixteen-foot bronze statue of Vladimir Lenin that, since 1995, has graced the corner of North 34<sup>th</sup> Street and Evanston Avenue, in front of a Taco Del Mar and a gelato shop. I'm here to visit the dumpsters behind The Essential Baking Company, a Western Washington chain of bakery-cafés famous (particularly its Wallingford location), dumpsters so renowned for their bounty that they can be found on several "dumpster maps" of Seattle. They are what some people call "daylight dumpsters," because they are in a discreet enough location, and with accepting enough employees, that one can glean from them in the daytime with little fear of reprisal. On Yelp.com, a business review site, users have even written separate entries of the store's trash. I've never purchased a loaf of bread from Essential, although I've eaten many.

Today none of the three dumpsters are nearly as full as I've seen them in the past, though there is still enough clean, dry, wrapped bread that I'm able to reach a whole-grain baguette without actually diving into the receptacle. I put the bread into my backpack and wait around for 15 or 20 minutes to see if anyone shows up, though no one

does. It's only about 3:30 in the afternoon; it's probably just bad timing. There are plenty of indications that these dumpsters are still popular. On the side of one somebody has spray painted the words "Burn Down Capitalism." On another someone has placed a PETA sticker: "Fish are Friends, Not Food!"

On the third is a note, typewritten and printed, stuck to the dumpster with a piece of scotch tape:

**Congratulations!**

**You've been selected to be a DAY MAKER!**

**This unique profession is completely voluntary, you pick your own hours and your own methods to make peoples' days. You could color pictures for all your friends or make them nachos or put flowers and poetry in strangers' mailboxes. Help people anonymously or spread love in a loud and colorful way. Nominate your day-make-ee's to be day makers too, or don't. Benefits include constant opportunity for creativity, flexible schedule, feelings of excitement and other feelings which have no name and may not even exist until you start making days. The sky is the limit, have fun! P.S. If you feel you've received this in error, think again!**

A year and a half before, on a cold, windy Saturday in March, I'd done a stakeout of these same dumpsters. The first visitors were a young woman in her mid-20's and her gray-haired mother who arrived in a Volvo sedan. Both were dressed in sneakers and jogging attire (they told me they'd just come from running a 5K.) It was their first time trying dumpster diving. I asked what had given them the idea and the daughter said she'd heard about it "on the news."

Oprah? I offered.

The daughter looked slightly embarrassed and she couldn't remember *exactly* where she'd heard it. She hastily selected a few loaves while her mother went to wait in the car.

In the course of about an hour and a half I met a landscaper who arrived in a pickup truck that he'd converted to run on veggie oil who said he once a month to collect bread for himself and his three roommates; a graduate student in architecture who rode up on his bicycle and said he'd been visiting this spot for the past two years, but never went dumpster diving anywhere else; and two young guys in a van collecting for the Saturday Food Not Bombs market, one of whom told me he'd heard a rumor about the bread once being soaked in bleach.

His friend, a guy in his late twenties dressed neatly and wearing stylish black glasses, said he thought it was just part of an annual cleaning by the company that owned the dumpsters. "I think it's to get rid of squirrels or something," he said.

"I don't know," said the other. "But I know people were pissed about it. There are people who expect this food to be here." He grinned. "People like me." He said that he'd also heard a rumor that the bread went to a farm to feed hogs. "But I don't feel like I'm stealing bread out of the hogs' mouths or anything."

I also met a college-aged girl who came on foot and who wouldn't tell me anything about herself or her dumpstering habits ("I know it kind of goes against the spirit of dumpster diving," she said, "but I'd rather not share that information"); and a pretty, well-dressed woman of about 35 who spent about 10 minutes sifting through baguettes, Parker House rolls, and loaves of rosemary focaccia. She was looking for challah.

Who were these people? Why were they getting food from the trash? Were they *freegans*? – the group of people I'd been chasing after for some weeks, feeling



increasingly foolish each time I uttered the word, feeling more and more like I was seeking a sort of mirage.

\* \* \*

What has changed since I was last in Seattle?

The recent mayoral elections saw Michael McGinn, a Sierra Club leader and activist, defeat Joe Mallahan, Vice President of wireless communications giant T-Mobile.

A coffeehouse opened in Capitol Hill called 15<sup>th</sup> Avenue Coffee and Tea. While a new coffee shop in Seattle is hardly news, this was noteworthy because it wasn't just any coffee shop but a Starbucks franchise masquerading as an independent neighborhood café. A reporter for DailyFinance.com called it "Starbucks in stealth mode." The only indication customers had that the café was owned by the behemoth corporation was a small "Inspired by Starbucks" disclaimer written on the bottom of its menus. According to several news reports Starbucks shills spent months spying on non-corporate coffeehouses for ideas to make their new venture seem more local, even jotting down their observations, like characters out of a French farce, in folders marked "Observation."

Rancho Bravo Tacos, a locally-owned Mexican restaurant, took over the building of a defunct Kentucky Fried Chicken. People are calling it "KF Taco."

Josh Harper, an animal rights activist (or terrorist, depending who you ask), was released from a three-year federal prison term for his work with the group Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (known as the SHAC7) and is now serving food at The Wayward Vegan Café in the U-District.

Boeing, Microsoft, and Seattle-based commercial truck-maker Vulcan, Inc. all experienced major layoffs. The University of Washington went on a hiring freeze. After a

146-year run, The Seattle-Post Intelligencer, one of the city's two daily newspapers, ceased print publication, losing most of its staff in the process.

Back in the bathroom at Bauhaus, my favorite piece of graffiti, and, I think, the saddest, is written on a single brick in the top right corner of the wall: "Seattle is not how I thought it would be." Of course I have no way of knowing who wrote these words and what was meant by them, though I have some ideas.

I recently came across a story in the online edition of The Portland (Ore.) Mercury about a 20-something guy named Ben Aubin who moved out West from North Carolina to open up a "free store" inside an old school bus. The Free Store is a shop in which all items are donated and then given away for free to whoever wants them. A group of volunteer bicycle messengers will even deliver the items to your home. However, the store not only accepts donations, but relies upon them to stay in business, as Aubin has to pay rent to the city to park the school bus, among other costs. The messengers accept tips.

"At first I thought Portland was going to be a liberal utopia," Aubin is quoted as saying, "and now I'm starting to see the duality of Portland, the racism, the objectification of women, the battle that occurs between cyclists and cars."

Naturally, Aubin and his ideals were both praised and bashed in the story's comments section. One poster called RegularAssDude was moved to respond: "Great just what we need, another naive transplant who comes to Portland expecting some post-grad eternal youth fantasy where everyone only works part time, rides bikes, and just gets along and dances to cutting edge DJ's! Sorry man, this is just another city with the same problems as any other city. Not everyone is here because of idealism, in fact a lot of folks

just happen to have been born here...maybe you should've looked a little deeper into the culture of Portland, Oregon as a whole instead of basing your opinion off hyperbolic newspaper articles and freegan fantasizing.”

I google the name “Derrick Jensen,” whose book “Endgame” I was encouraged to read by some Bauhaus bathroom vandal. I’d never heard of Jensen before but am unsurprised to learn that though he now (according to Wikipedia, anyway) lives in Crescent City, California, he was a longtime resident of the Northwest. His philosophy is what is often referred to as anarcho-primitivism. On the website Endgamethebook.org I read about the “premises” of Endgame. There are 20, but here’s a sampling:

**Premise One: Civilization is not and never can be sustainable. This is especially true for industrial civilization.**

**Premise Fifteen: Love does not imply pacifism.**

**Premise Eight: The needs of the natural world are more important than the needs of the economic system.**

On Jensen’s official website I learn that the author is available to give talks to book clubs, activist groups, and other organizations for \$100 per hour – by phone or webcam, that is. His in-person fees are higher. I also learn that he sells promotional t-shirts.

\* \* \*

My search for freegans, or rather my search for the freegan ideal, began, innocuously enough, with a class assignment: Do something you’ve never done before. Do something you’ve never done before, then write about. At the time I was in my second semester of graduate school for journalism and the class was “Feature Writing.” I decided to go dumpster diving. For food.

The idea hadn't come to me entirely out of the blue. The previous Sunday morning I'd come into the kitchen to find a few loaves of bread on the counter, which had come from the bakery down the street. My roommate told me that the previous night, on her drunken walk home from the bars downtown, she'd grabbed them out of the bakery's dumpster. I suppose some people would have found this gross, appalling, or shocking, but, honestly, I didn't think too much about it. The bread wasn't moldy or strange looking in any way. It smelled good. I've never been a very picky or squeamish person about food, and I admit I didn't think too hard about what seemingly fresh bread had been doing in the garbage can. I simply grabbed a knife and butter and made myself some toast. By lunch I'd forgotten all about it.

And this hadn't been the first time that I'd heard before of people – non-starving, non-desperate, middle-class people – dumpster diving for food. The year after I finished my undergraduate degree I worked for an AmeriCorps program in Austin, Texas, and to save money I lived in a co-op house with about 15 other people. One effect of this experience was that it permanently soured me on the idea of communal living – the weekly meetings about why nobody ever showed up to the weekly meetings; the chore lists that half the house ignored; the heated, increasingly ugly debates on how to spend the food budget – Organic olive oil or non-organic olive oil? Rolled oats and flax seeds or country-style ribs and Dr. Pepper?

But living in that house had also introduced me to the idea of dumpster diving as a political statement. A guy Michael Bluejay, a sort of small-time Austin anti-consumerist celebrity, used to bike around to all the different co-op houses supplying our freezers with vast quantities of bagels that he'd pilfered from behind the Einstein's near the UT

campus. At this stage in my life I wasn't particularly into politics and wasn't sure exactly what type of political statement this was supposed to be making, but I was vaguely aware that it was one.

That same year I traveled to Seattle over the Thanksgiving holiday to visit a friend, my most feminist, PC friend, the only person I hung around with who used words like "gentrification" and "white privilege" in casual conversation. On this trip I met my friend's girlfriend, who belonged to a food co-op of sorts called The Pantry. As part of her membership dues she was required to go dumpster diving once a week with another co-op member and bring the spoils back to the community kitchen where they would then be available to all. I remember learning that hard cheeses were one of the best and safest foods to dumpster dive and that Trader Joe's was one of the best spots in Seattle for diving.

Like hopping trains and begging change for hooch, I had always associated dumpster diving with punk/hobo types who saw it as a way of sticking it to the man. But I assumed that it was done in a tongue-in-cheek sort of way and not out of rigidly earnest moral convictions. And perhaps there once was a time when dumpster diving was seen as a fun, vaguely subversive, money-saving activity that nobody took too seriously. But those were the days when punk rock meant Iggy Pop screaming about his cock in his pocket, not when vegan cupcake shops advertised themselves as "punk rock" bakeries.

On the website [Freegan.info](http://Freegan.info) I learned that not only could one take dumpster diving as a matter of utmost seriousness; one could actually base one's entire moral code around it. I never would have found this website – perhaps would never have even heard

the word “freegan” – if I hadn’t committed one fatal error: I googled the term “dumpster diving.”

I had thought at the time that I was doing a good thing. In writing my article I wouldn’t just detail my own personal experience of going dumpster diving for the first time, which hadn’t been particularly fruitful or exciting, perhaps because, being inexperienced, I hadn’t really known where to look. Most of what I had found looked and smelled, like, well, garbage. No; I would *expand* on the topic. I would try to put dumpster diving into a larger historical and sociological context.

And so I googled, and there in the top ten search results for “dumpster diving” sat Freegan.info, “a site for revealing human overconsumption and waste.” The home page showed a picture of a rather attractive young redheaded woman emerging from a garbage bin holding a bag of rather fresh-looking vegetables. A mission statement read:

Freeigans are people who employ alternative strategies for living based on limited participation in the conventional economy and minimal consumption of resources. Freeigans embrace community, generosity, social concern, freedom, cooperation, and sharing in opposition to a society based on materialism, moral apathy, competition, conformity, and greed.

Clearly, that level of self-righteousness must be intended as satire. But a further google search of the word “freegan” revealed something more interesting. News stories on freeigans, some of them in major media outlets like the UK Independent and The Washington Post had been cropping up, many of them containing interviews with members of Freegan.info, who invited media along on their “trash tours” of New York City.

“Freeigans, shocked at the extent of consumer waste, are changing the way they eat,” the UK Independent wrote in February 2006. “Freeigans in Boulder want to control

wasteful society” declared a headline in Colorado’s Boulder Daily Camera a few months later.

But after I wrote my little class assignment on dumpster diving I forgot all about freeganism for some months. Once or twice my roommates and I went and dumpstered some pizza from behind the Little Caesar’s, but it didn’t go beyond that. But then the time to pick a topic for my master’s thesis began approaching. I was, like many other people, becoming increasingly environmentally aware, and increasingly focused on reducing my own consumption. I had begun recycling more, using handkerchiefs instead of tissues, saying “No, thank you, I don’t need a bag,” getting to-go coffee in a reusable cup. Since high school I had purchased more than half of my clothing at thrift stores and I had been consciously using my car less and less, to the point that I was spending much more on insurance each month than I was on gas.

Freegans, according to quotes attributed to them in news articles and on [Freegan.info](http://Freegan.info), cared about these issues, too. Environmental destruction and global poverty were at the crux of their whole lifestyle. (Although they ranked animal rights right up there, too, and I must admit that this has never been a major concern for me, not counting the year I spent as a vegetarian, which was the ninth grade.) But I have always considered veganism and vegetarianism as legitimate moral stances, and I didn’t go into the project with much bias on that front.

No, any bias I had regarding freeganism was mostly about the rhetoric, which I found preachy, propagandist, and just plain annoying. Nevertheless, some of the practices advocated by freegans – dumpster diving, wild foraging, guerilla gardens, squatting, free bicycle workshops – seemed straightforward enough. If a city lot was vacant, why

shouldn't somebody make use of it by planting a garden? If a store wanted to throw out perfectly good food, why shouldn't somebody eat it? How could freely sharing one's knowledge of fixing bikes be a bad thing? It all seemed sort of inspiring.

I thought, somehow, that I could write about the practices of freeganism while skirting around the ideology. Keep it pragmatic. Keep it simple. But it didn't work, and for reasons that should have been obvious. For stripped of the grandiose language and lofty ideals, freeganism wasn't freeganism – it wasn't really anything. It was just the same old siren song that people have been falling for since the beginning of time: the free lunch.

\* \* \*

Seattle seemed the perfect backdrop for researching the freegan lifestyle – liberal, urban, a purported mecca of dumpster diving (a rumor I found to be true.) It had been the site of the 1999 WTO riots, where tens of thousands took to the streets to oppose the course of global capitalism, yet it was also headquarters of some of the world's most ubiquitous corporations: Boeing, Microsoft, Starbucks.

I had thought I would stay in Seattle about a month. I had a couple friends there with whom I could stay for free; I thought would simply find a few freegans, see how they lived, get some good quotes, go back to Montana, write up my story, and call it good. Little did I know that I would stay in Seattle eight months; that I would become obsessed with the topic; that I would get wrapped up in endless semantic debates about what the word “freegan” really meant; that I would read Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein and Raj Patel trying to pinpoint exactly why and how global capitalism, industrial agriculture, and genetically modified foods were evil; that I would spend hours combing



through catty chatroom discussions about whether or not dumpster diving was a bourgeois activity, whether or not eating roadkill constituted freeganism, whether or not shoplifting was a valid way of protesting “the system”; that I would try to untangle and dismantle the sort of logic that would cause somebody to spray paint “Burn Down Capitalism” on a dumpster; that I would read news stories about the growing global food crisis and associated rioting in Haiti, the Philippines, Pakistan, Guatemala; that I would try to connect this, somehow, with the overflowing American dumpsters, and would wonder how taking food from these dumpsters could possibly ease these situations in any way; that the whole experience would leave me yo-yoing between feelings of lighthearted optimism and nihilistic despair.

I had thought I could write a better story than those that I’d read in newspapers and on blogs that concentrated on the most obvious and (to me) dull aspects of the dumpstering lifestyle. Will it make you sick? Is it illegal?

I wanted to get to the *big* question. *Why* were people doing this? What was the *point* of it all? But determining human motivation is no small task, and I hadn’t realized it starting out, but I’d gotten a bit grandiose myself, thinking I could somehow solve these riddles.

Before I left for Seattle, however, I conducted a telephone interview with Cindy Rosin, one of the founding members of the Freegan.info collective, which was headquartered in New York City. I had assumed that the website had invented the term “freegan” or could at least fill me in on its origin. But when I asked Rosin when she had first heard of freeganism, she said, with some disgust, “I don’t know when I first heard the *word*.”

“Freegan, she told me, “is a friendly way of saying ‘anti-capitalist.’”

According to the 31-year old Rosin, dumpster diving was really not the point of freeganism at all. She expressed dismay that the rash of media attention that freeganism had garnered – which by that time included profiles in The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, and on Anderson Cooper’s 360 – was focused almost exclusively on people eating from rubbish bins.

She wanted to stress that freeganism also included practices like community gardens and wild foraging. However, she said that she had never had much luck with gardening herself. “In the city,” she said “dumpster diving is the most convenient way to get your food.” She admitted that she also knew few freegans who went totally without buying food, but when they did they would buy as “organic, free-range, and vegan as possible.”

Rosin told me that, first and foremost, she considered herself an activist; although she was currently working a paid job as an after-school arts instructor for kids. She spent part of the year volunteering with the Buffalo Field Campaign in Yellowstone Park, and the other part volunteering with various other organizations like Freegan.info and the Wetlands Activism Preserve, a group that protested outside the headquarters of companies like J.Crew and Victoria’s Secret to try to stop them from destroying so much boreal forest by sending out so many catalogues in the mail.

In fact, Rosin told me, the reason that she and a few other fellow activists had started Freegan.info was because they were tired of boycotting corporations, feeling that it had no effect. All corporations, they came to realize, were bad. The entire system was corrupt. She said that although most freegans were from more-privileged backgrounds

including “ex-stockbrokers and ex-corporate cronies” that freeganism “spoke to basic needs.”

“Even if people think it’s a little strange what we’re doing,” she said, “they’re horrified by the waste.”

But, I venture, couldn’t some of the practices of freeganism – dumpster diving, squatting, hitch-hiking – seem a little hypocritical? After all, wasn’t it just feeding off the same system one supposedly wanted nothing to do with?

“Saying freeganism is hypocritical,” Rosin said, lightning quick, “is a knee-jerk reaction.”

Still, in some way that it took me quite a while to realize, I had internalized the ideology of Freegan.info. If nothing else, it made me continue to seek out people who lived closer and closer to the freegan ideal – people who did not spend money, on either rent, food, or transportation; people who had somehow become totally self-sustaining and had disengaged from the system.

I tried to delve into all aspects of the freegan lifestyle; my tactics for seeking out freegans were wide and varied, and met with varying degrees of success. Over the course of those eight months in Seattle I volunteered at Food Not Bombs and hung around anarchist bookshops; I contacted members of online dumpster diving meet up groups (most of which have since gone extinct) and emailed people who had pasted information about freeganism onto their MySpace pages; I attended Craft Nights, a Really Really Free Market, and a class on urban chicken keeping put on by the Seattle Free School; I spent a weekend at an intentional community (the now-preferred term for what was once called a

hippie commune) in the Hood River Valley; I attended various workshops put on by a disparate group of environmental activists at the 2008 Northwest Climate Convergence; I went on the dumpster stakeout at the Essential Baking Company and did a fair amount of dumpster diving at spots around Seattle. Having not gone full-time freegan myself, I fit all this into working several different jobs.

When I tried to seek out the so-called freegan lifestyle beyond dumpster diving I generally failed, partially because, in the world beyond the Internet, the word “freegan” was basically used to mean a dumpster diver, although plenty of dumpster divers had never heard of it. Some people, I learned, even interpreted the word in its most literal sense – taking “freegan” as a portmanteau of “free” and “vegan” – and would only eat meat, eggs, or dairy if they had been free.

This is not to say that many of these dumpster divers didn’t see their eating habits a part of an anti-consumerist lifestyle or an expression of their politics. But I found some people did not want to associate with the word “freegan” because they found it too extreme; others found it too middle-class, a form of “lifestyle anarchism” and not extreme enough; others found it nothing but a silly, useless label. In my search for the freegan ideal I found pacifists, agitators, pragmatists, and ideologues. I found a great deal of denial, frustration, self-delusion, but also, a reason to be hopeful.

\* \* \*

The first serious dumpster divers I met were Colin and Johnny. They were 21 and 20 years old respectively, housemates, both students at The University of Washington. Colin was majoring in English, Johnny in Environmental Studies. I got in touch with

Colin through an old friend of mine from high school, someone I'd kept in sporadic contact with and who had lived for a time in Seattle. Shortly before leaving Montana I sent him an email to find out if he might know any people in the Seattle area who regularly went dumpster diving or any people who would consider themselves freegans. He directed me to Colin, whom he'd met the previous year on a study-abroad program in Ecuador.

Both Colin and Johnny were skinny but fit-looking (neither owned a car and got around almost exclusively by bicycle). I found them to be charming, polite, and funny. I met them before our excursion at their apartment, where they kindly offered me tea and gave me a tour of the kitchen. They showed me, rather proudly, all the food they'd procured from various dumpsters. Their refrigerator and shelves were stocked with fancy foods that seemed a bit *haute cuisine* for a couple of college students. When Johnny pulled a jar of olive tapenade from the refrigerator he asked, "Do you know what this word means? I have no idea what this is."

Colin told me that he had first been introduced to dumpster diving about a year before by a friend and had been hooked on it ever since. Just talking about it made him giddy. "The first time I went I took home cat food I was so excited," he said. "And I don't even have a cat."

He estimated that he and Johnny got about 70 to 80 percent of their food from the trash. Johnny told me that milk and eggs in good condition could be pretty difficult to find and that they would sometimes buy them. But if they wanted to, they said, they could easily get all the sustenance they needed from dumpsters. They also belonged to

The Pantry, the same one my friend had belonged to years before, and in lieu of the monthly membership dues, they simply did a lot of dumpster diving.

While Colin told me that he would only eat meat if it came from a dumpster, he wouldn't consider himself a freegan. He knew about the Freegan.info people in New York, but called them "really intense."

"I think everything in New York is more intense," he said. "I think you just have to be really intense to even live there."

They were into dumpster diving, mainly, they said, for the fun of it, though, they did it, too, for environmental reasons; for that same reason they didn't drive cars. Sometimes they participated in Critical Mass group bike rides, rides which take place in hundreds of cities throughout the world the last Friday of each month, to live out the slogan: "We're not blocking traffic. We are traffic." Colin had recently worked with the UW Sweat-Free Coalition, which had effectively petitioned the university to end the production of UW apparel in sweatshops.

Colin and Johnny got plenty of other stuff from the trash besides food – furniture, household items, clothes. When I paid Johnny a compliment on his suspenders he told me that he'd gotten them, along with the pants and sweater he was wearing (an Abercrombie & Fitch brand sweater, he told me, "some frat boy sweater") all from a dumpster. Colin thought his own pants might also have been dumpstered, though he couldn't remember.

They told me about their (mostly-unsuccessful) wine-making experiments with the vast quantities of discarded juice they'd pick up from outside Seattle's Naked Juice factory.

They told me that dumpster diving was pretty popular among the student population at UW and that there wasn't a whole lot of stigma against it – amongst their peers, that is. Colin, who grew up on Mercer Island (a Seattle neighborhood where the median home price tops \$1,000,000) said that he hadn't told his parents he went dumpster diving and he didn't plan on it. Johnny, originally from Richmond, Virginia, said he had told his mother about it, but not his “really conservative” father.

Neither felt that he would continue this lifestyle forever, though both said it was a very important part their lives at the moment. Johnny acknowledged that biking everywhere is a lot easier when you're a student without the responsibilities of a family or a full-time job. Colin said he would eventually wanted to live out in the country someday, and that dumpster diving probably wouldn't fit into this plan. He hoped to be able to grow or raise a lot of his own food.

That night we visited only two dumpsters – Trader Joe's in the University District and the nearby QFC. The QFC, they told me, was a good source of fruits and vegetables because it has a compost dumpster, i.e., one that contains only cardboard and produce. Nevertheless, we returned with a ridiculous quantity and quality of food. Chicken sausage, chorizo sausage, frozen chicken breasts, yogurt, pasta, miniature frozen quiches, Trader Joe's brand mini beef tacos, wild Coho salmon, chocolate-chip cookie dough, almond milk, almond butter, jasmine rice, broccoli, lettuce, apples, lemons, bell peppers, and one mango.

None of it was moldy. None of it more than a day or two past the expiration date. Much of it had been discarded, apparently, for cosmetic defects – a dent in a box or cereal, a slight tear in a bag of rice, an oddly-shaped apple.

Johnny told me they had once found an entire case of maple syrup in which only one of the twelve bottles was broken.

Neither seemed the slightest bit squeamish about really getting down in the dumpster and rooting through some foul garbage to get to the good stuff – in fact they seemed to genuinely enjoy it, as though it were a sport. They came equipped with gear: gloves to protect their hands, and headlamps to inspect their finds. Dumpstering with them felt downright festive, like an adventure. Johnny kept coming across containers of a type of organic yogurt called YoBaby – presumably marketed for babies – and each time he yelled out “Yo, baby!” When Colin discovered a partially consumed jar of almond butter he couldn’t stop remarking on his good fortune. “This would be like \$10, probably,” he said. “At least.”

At one point while we were at Trader Joe’s, an employee came out pushing a cart of trash. Without batting an eye he started handing the bags of garbage for Colin and Johnny to sort through, instead of simply tossing them in. It was clear he was used to dumpster divers. I asked if he ever took home any of the stuff he was supposed to put in the garbage, and he said, with some scorn, “I wouldn’t eat most of this stuff when it comes *in* to the store.” He was a vegan, he told me, and he got all of his fruits and vegetables from farmer’s markets.



Not long after that a group of kids from Olympia showed up and let themselves into the little unlocked fence that surrounded the dumpster. “You all want to get in here?” Johnny asked them. “Or are you heading out?”

No, they said, they didn’t want to dive in, they were just out bumming around. They offered to share some of the bread they got earlier at the Essential Baking Company, and Colin took them up on a couple of loaves. I asked them what the dumpster scene was like in Olympia and they told me it wasn’t quite as good as in Seattle, not for food anyway. One girl told me that she made regular use of the Jo-Ann’s Fabric dumpster, though, for craft supplies. “Although, for the next few days,” she said, “I’m, like, covered in glitter.”

The next weekend I’m back at Colin and Johnny’s place, but this time for a house party. It’s not just a party, I learn, but a wedding. Apparently, Colin had earned some sort of ministerial certificate from a website. I missed the ceremony though I gathered the two brides were the ones dressed in white togas with green ivy painted on their faces and arms. Colin was dressed similarly. The kitchen table was spread with bread and various tapenades, hummuses and dips, along with big jugs of cheap wine.

At one point the toilet overflowed, apparently because of a water conservation experiment gone wrong. Later Colin grabbed his guitar, and Johnny his banjo, and they and other members of their bluegrass band, Old Technology, began an impromptu jam session in the basement. Later they were joined by one of the brides, who descended the stairs in her flowing white robes playing the bagpipes.

\* \* \*

A few weeks later I met with Jess, a 20-year-old former Seattle Pacific University student. I had found her through her email address, after I read an article in *The Pelican*, SPU's student newspaper, which had cited her as a member of SPU's burgeoning freegan scene. It turned out she was a friend of Colin's and that he had been the one who had introduced her to dumpster diving.

I met her one morning at the house she shared with seven other female students in Queen Anne. She was still wearing pajamas and was a little groggy and with mussed-up hair. She spoke slowly and thoughtfully, choosing her words with obvious care.

There was some tension, she told me, between herself and her housemates. For one thing, she was the only one who didn't own a car. There was also plenty of tension with her parents. She was the oldest of six children, raised in a middle-class fundamentalist Christian household in a Seattle suburb. Because her parents didn't agree with many aspects of her lifestyle, including dumpster diving and having gay friends, they had told her they would no longer pay for her education.

In fact, she had already left school, and was leaving the following week for Norway where she would meet up with her boyfriend who was studying at a school for boat-making. She had saved up money for the trip by working at a daycare center. After that she planned on traveling through more of Europe, volunteering at organic farms with the WOOFF program. She told me she was looking forward to participating in a sheep or pig slaughter to see how an animal "gives its life to the betterment of people."

Jess told me that she no longer went dumpster diving for food, though she said: "I completely agree with dumpster and freegan ideals. I think they're completely legitimate."

She had stopped for a couple of reasons. One was that she realized that she wanted to support local farmers, so she joined a Community Supported Agriculture program. Another was that, the previous summer, when many of her dumpster diving friends had left the city for the school break, she was left with no one to go diving with.

Once, when she had tried diving alone, two men had jumped over the gate and started shouting at her to leave. “It turned into something that wasn’t funny anymore,” she said. “It became scary.”

She felt, though, that dumpstering had taught her a lot. “For me it’s about seeing how much we throw away as a community and as a country, to see how much we waste. That’s so the antithesis to what and who I want to be.” She told me of visiting China the previous summer and seeing how people pick through trash on the streets and find new uses for things. “There wasn’t the stigma about trash that we have in America,” she said.

She showed me a stack of books that she’d been reading, mostly about food politics. There were a few titles by Michael Pollan and a copy of “The Revolution Will Not Be Microwaved.” Her readings had prompted her to stop eating baked bread – “I think the use of that as a carbohydrate is very negative. Cultured bacteria in your diet is something that is good for you. I’ve been eating spelt bread that is still alive.”

On meat she said: “I’ve been experimenting with liver and other inexpensive meat parts that aren’t usually used because people find them to be gross. I see meat to be a very important part of your diet, but I’m also very conscious of where the meat is coming from.”

Though part of her missed her days of dumpster diving – “It was very much a social event for me” – she had never dumpster diving as any sort of solution to anything.

“I think food is something we’ll always have to pay for,” she said.

\* \* \*

Perhaps I was getting this freegan thing a bit figured out. Dumpster diving was a sort of phase for environmentally conscious young people to go through before they moved on to something else a little more productive, like growing their own food. Seeing so much waste could teach people to be more frugal, more conscientious.

But then things started to get a bit strange. Freegans appeared on The Oprah Show, in an episode entitled “How Far Would You Go: Lisa Ling Reports,” which aired in late February 2008. The other half of that day’s show featured a 43-year-old single mom who had taken up stripping to support her three kids. Although freegans had appeared in the media before, they had never had the sort of exposure they got on Oprah, which draws upwards of seven million viewers a day. Almost immediately, new dumpster diving clubs formed on social networking sites. Middle-class, middle-aged moms across the country were blogging about how they wanted to start dumpster diving as a way to “go green” or reduce their household budgets.

I found that some of these new groups wanted to distance themselves as much as possible from the more radical aspects of freegan culture. One such group, The Seattle Dumpster Divas, was started by a young woman named Desiree, who was training to be a life coach. Her posting read:

**Meet other fun, fabulous (and otherwise normal) ladies interested in sustainable living, salvaging, reusing, repurposing and having fun. This group is open to all non-radical, socially conscious women concerned about wastefulness and reducing their impact, regardless of dumpster experience. Beginners and experienced divers encouraged to join. Radical Seattleites and fringe-dwellers need not apply.**

I attended two meetings of the Dumpster Divas. At the first, in Desiree's living room, we discussed the places we might want to go diving at the second meeting. The normal, non-radical-looking women were in their late 20's and thirties and had jobs like stay-at-home mom and advertising copywriter. We discussed safety and hygiene. Everyone agreed that dumpstered meat was just too gross, too risky. Having spent months researching the topic, I was regarded as a sort of expert. One woman asked my advice: Where would be a good place for a novice diver to start out? I suggested the Essential Baking Company since its dumpsters contained only bread and paper, and were free of wet garbage or other potentially gross stuff like coffee grounds and dairy products.

“Oh,” she said with a frown, “but we don't do bread at our house anymore.”

\* \* \*

When the rash of dumpster diving groups had begun appearing online I noticed that nearly half the postings were not from people interested in dumpster diving. They were from journalists interested in writing about these groups. “I'm a student at Columbia College Chicago and I'm making a documentary on Freegans. I'm looking for anyone in the Chicago area to talk to about Freeganism. If you are interested please send me message. I would love to talk to you,” wrote one. “Hi folks, I'm a freelance journalist, originally from London, now based in Sydney, Australia. I have been commissioned by a women's magazine called YEN to write a feature on freegans in Australia and the UK. I would love to talk to you,” wrote another.

\* \* \*

It was John who started me thinking that perhaps my search for the ideal freegan was leading me on a wild goose chase.

I first met John in the kitchen of a Unitarian Church near Yesler Terrace, Seattle's oldest housing project, where every Sunday, Food Not Bombs would gather to cook a vegetarian meal for the homeless. The food would then be served in a park in nearby Pioneer Square, a longtime magnet for the city's destitute, an area that has stubbornly resisted all the efforts – and there have been many – to fully gentrify it. Legend has it the neighborhood is the original Skid Row, so named for the time when Seattle was a rough-and-tumble lumber town, and loggers would send felled trees careening down Yesler Way to a steam powered mill on Elliott Bay. While the mill is no more, the seedy reputation has stuck. No matter how many antique stores, cafes, and art galleries have moved in since, Pioneer Square is better known for prostitutes, transients, hard drugs, and mental illness.

Still, since about 1997, rain or shine (or rain) the Seattle chapter of Food Not Bombs has shown up on Sundays with lentil soup, grilled vegetables, fruit salad, hot coffee, bread, hummus, mashed potatoes, rice and beans – basically anything vegetarian (and almost always vegan) that can be cobbled together from food that has either been donated from stores or “recovered” from dumpsters. Anyone who wants to eat can eat. No forms. No questions asked. No money exchanged. No food handlers' permits.

Food Not Bombs was formed in 1980 by a group of anti-nuclear activists in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and has since grown several hundred chapters across the U.S. and cities worldwide including Kiev, Istanbul, and Bangkok. Because no one really keeps records, however, and all branches operate autonomously, it's hard to know when one

FNB starts up or when one folds. FNB has served food to survivors of the Asian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, to 9/11 rescue workers, and to activists at the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle. It is not your average charitable organization in that it has no hierarchal structure, no formal leaders, no paid employees, and, in fact, according to its website “is not a charity.” What it *is* exactly, is slightly harder to define. While its main activity is feeding the hungry with food that would otherwise be wasted, it is also linked (again, according to its website) with a diversity of other groups– “Earth First!, The Leonard Peltier Defense Committee, the Anarchist Black Cross, the Industrial Workers of the World, Homes Not Jails, Anti Racist Action, In Defense of Animals, [and] the Free Radio Movement” – and causes “to stop the globalization of the economy, restrictions to the movements of people, end exploitation and the destruction of the earth.”

As one might expect it’s attractive to those looking to infuse their good deeds with the spirit of rebellion, or spice their pragmatism with a heavy dose of ideology.

Nevertheless, on the occasions I helped serve food in the park – maybe three or four times altogether (other times I stayed behind in the kitchen to help clean up) – I saw that Food Not Bombs, in its efforts to feed the hungry at least, was far from ineffective. I ragged and downtrodden men (they were almost always men) light up with glee when we arrived and began unloading our bowls and chafing dishes. “The food’s here! The food’s here!” I remember one man shouting as he rushed over to help us carry. Sure, there were occasional complaints. The potatoes were too salty. We’d forgotten to bring sugar for coffee. But the prevailing attitude was one of thankfulness. I saw men come back for third, fourth, and fifth helpings, heard “God, bless you,” many times over, and once saw a

man nearly overjoyed when we turned up one day with sautéed asparagus, a vegetable he told me that he'd spent much of his life picking in eastern Washington.

But back to John. I'd been to Food Not Bombs a few times before, but his face was new to me. He stuck out a bit, not only because, at 32, he was somewhat older than the average FNB volunteer, but also because he talked loudly and incessantly, seemingly oblivious to whether anyone was listening. Tall, sturdy, and balding, with strong facial features and thick eyebrows, he put me in mind of Frankenstein's monster, although this could possibly be because he talked about zombies so much.

I'd arrived a little late that day and cooking was well under way. The only task left was helping John dice up a large quantity of green peppers. I got the feeling that the other volunteers found him a bit obnoxious, and had purposely avoided working next to him. At first I shared their assessment, but within a matter of minutes he began to grow on me. I found his rambling monologues funny and insightful, albeit in a slightly twisted way.

His favorite subjects, in addition to zombies and zombie movies, seemed to be the baby boomers, the baby boomers' "obsession with their own demise," black market organ donation, anarchy, sitcoms – particularly Seinfeld and Frasier – and the van in which he lived.

His rambunctious nature was a welcome change from the regular kitchen atmosphere, which always seemed to me a bit awkward. There was a core group of perhaps three to five volunteers, mostly in their twenties, who showed up faithfully. But they were often joined by a rotating crew of sulky teenagers who were armed more with



opinions than cooking skills or the desire to learn them. Though there were a few volunteers I really clicked with, others were downright unfriendly.

John was, at least, talkative, and when he asked me what I was doing in Seattle, what I was doing at Food Not Bombs, I decided to reveal, oh-so-casually, that I was researching a project about freegans. “Oh,” he said, “that kind of describes me.” I asked if he would like to meet up later that week at my place for an interview, and he agreed.

Was John the more hardcore sort of freegan I’d been seeking?

After all, he lived in his van. That wasn’t exactly squatting, but it was close. The freegans I’d met thus far, had for the most part, gone to school, had jobs, paid rent. Sure, they rode bikes, did volunteer work, and went dumpster diving for food. But at this point I was still under the impression that there was a cohesive community of people out there calling themselves freegans, an idea I must have picked up through my massive intake of media on the subject. I had, it seemed, bought into the hype.

\* \* \*

When I invited John into my living room and offered him a cup of coffee and some cookies, I wondered if he’d accept. After all, I’d paid for them – could they truly be considered free? He took me up on both, without questions, though I shouldn’t have worried. After we had settled comfortably into two armchairs, I ventured to get the conversation off the ground, “So, you would consider yourself a freegan?” He replied, somewhat huffily, “No, I don’t like labels.”

Then, after a slight pause he added with a devilish grin: “I’m more a petty criminal than a freegan.”

I asked, then, if he could define freegan for me.

“That’s kind of a new word,” he said. “I remember seeing it in an article in the newspaper about it a few years back, about these vegans in New York that wouldn’t pay for their food. But then I’ve also heard it used for people into a more free or low-cost lifestyle. Finding stuff and getting services for free. But really, it’s just a label.”

John’s basic idea on freeganism was that it’s nothing new at all, but a sort of media invention. “It all comes from the Sixties,” he said, “the whole peace, love, and stewards of the earth type stuff.”

“But once the media get hold of something they’re gonna brand it.”

In the next three and a half hours we talked about his life, his childhood, his views on art, on politics (“My whole lifestyle comes from being politically angry”); on drugs, on commercialization (“I was watching TV the other night and I saw that Pizza Hut came out with a new pizza called ‘The Natural,’ with organic cheese and organic tomatoes”); on the film he was making on anarchy (“It’s very DIY”); on getting fired from his most recent job as a security job at Pike Place Market (“The reason they gave for my termination was that I locked some keys in the bathroom, but I really don’t know why they fired me”); on his monthly budget, which was about \$100, consisting of a cell phone plan and a membership to 24-Hour Fitness, where he went to take showers.

He moved from topic to topic, like a bee in a field of flowers, and he answered only the questions he felt like answering, and often in a cryptic fashion

At one point, he asked if I’d heard about the recent bombings of four unsold luxury “eco-homes” in a suburb north of Seattle, bombings that had been claimed by the

controversial activist group the Earth Liberation Front. He didn't take credit for them, though I had to wonder.

At another point he said, abruptly, "Do you have any mental illness in your family?"

John told me that he grew up an only child of hippie parents who moved around a lot. "My dad did a whole bunch of stuff. He had a college degree, but he didn't have a professional career sort of thing. My dad did a lot of carpentry in Oregon. My mom had a restaurant in Puyallup for awhile. My parents grew drugs for awhile. I've grown drugs."

"I'm not a very good job hunter, I guess. I've had a lot of corporate jobs. Maybe that's where my freeganism comes from. I'm not real excited about the job world. It just seems like a drag."

Nor did he have much respect for conventional NGOs. "I feel like most non-profits are a lot of people sitting around benefiting."

He said he believed in direct action, though he felt there weren't many opportunities for it. "It's that sort of activism that's really frowned upon by the mainstream," he said, "like people getting in rubber boats and confronting whalers." (This was before the reality series "Whale Wars" began appearing on Animal Planet.)

John didn't dumpster dive, he said, because there just wasn't any need for him to. He got his food mostly from food banks, or Food Not Bombs, with occasional supplemental Jumbo Jacks from Jack-In-The-Box.

"There's just so much food out there period."

John said he doubted that he'd ever have a big house or a nice car or go on exotic vacations, although he believed that if he wanted these things he could get them. "I don't

have to do this,” he said. “I’m choosing to do this. I just don’t get a lot of satisfaction out of owning a lot of stuff.”

He didn’t believe, despite all the media attention on freeganism, that it would ever become mainstream. “It’s too freakish,” he said. “Too extreme. It makes great television and great stories, people who’ve gone the road less traveled and drastically cut down on their consumption.”

“I think every generation follows the next. I think if your parents were pretty much middle-class then you’re gonna be the same thing. My parents were pretty much hippies and I’m like a second generation alternative.”

I asked about the plot of his film about anarchy.

He said that it didn’t having much of a plot, though it was based of a “very perverse idea.”

“The idea is that American society is inefficient. And it’s not good for you. So why don’t you just become violent?”

“So it promotes violence?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s almost like gangsta rap. But even though it’s darker it’s got an optimistic ending.”

“So it’s about making things better?” I asked skeptically.

“Yeah,” he said with a chuckle, “It’s about making things better.”

\* \* \*

On Saturday afternoon I take a long bus ride down south to Georgetown, an out-of-the-way neighborhood full of what one Seattle Weekly writer called “post-squat,

industrial bohemian chic.” It is home to the city’s oldest saloon, a groovy comic book shop/record store, a few coffeehouses, a pizza parlor, a few junk shops and antique stores. It once boasted the Rainier Brewing Company, the sixth largest brewery in the world at one time; in the late 1990’s the company was sold to Stroh’s before being sold again to Pabst. The building, however, remains intact and now houses a variety of smaller businesses including a roastery for Tully’s coffee beans and a capoeira studio.

The point of this excursion is to attend today’s Really Really Free Market (RRFM), an exchange of goods and services where everything is supposed to be completely free without trade or barter. The concept of the RRFM was developed in San Francisco in 2005 and has since spread to other cities around the country and a few in other parts of the world. From what I gather from the web, some of the markets are going strong, others have ceased, and others occur somewhat sporadically.

On the bus I eavesdrop on a conversation between a homeless girl who lives under an overpass and a middle-aged couple who live in Tent City. The girl keeps raving about her sweatshirt. “I mean it’s just some dumb tourist hoodie but it’s the warmest thing I’ve ever owned. And I mean I’m homeless and I sleep outside and I’m just so toasty in this thing.”

“Are you from Colorado?” the woman asks.

“No, it’s funny because people always ask me that when I have this sweatshirt on, but I don’t think I could even point Colorado out on a map.”

The girl’s stop comes up first and just before she walks out the door the older woman yells after her: “Hey, you forgot your cookies!” and the girl runs back to grab them.

\* \* \*

When I get off a few stops later the first thing I notice is some graffiti stenciled on the sidewalk. “Save this city: Burn it Down!”

I make my way over to Oxbow Park, where today’s market is supposedly being held. I say supposedly because when I show up the only people in the park, which is tiny, are two men putting some touch-up paint on an enormous pair of cowboy boots that sit next to an enormous cowboy hat. The Hat N’ Boots, I learn later, were built in 1954 as advertising for a Texaco gas station and were dreamed up by an entrepreneur named Buford Seals who wanted to make them part of a 200-store western-themed mega mall that never came to fruition.

Awed as I am by the presence of the largest cowboy hat and boots I’ve seen in my life, I am still wondering where the RRFM is. Two separate websites told me the market would be occurring here today between 12 and 4. It’s about one thirty, and I double check the calendar on my phone to make sure it’s the second Sunday of the month. Yup. I go sit on a bench to ponder what I should do now.

The words “2005 Starbuck’s Neighborhood Recipient Award” are inscribed in one of the recycled plastic boards. On another board is a quote by Aristotle: “Nature does nothing uselessly.”

Is this God, by way of Aristotle and Starbucks, telling me that I should go ask the painters where the market is?

First, though, I want to know why they’re repainting the boot.

Vandals, they tell me.

I ask what the vandals had written.

“Who knows?” says the bigger of the two guys, dressed in a red and black lumberjack coat. “Something stupid. They just like to see their own names.”

“Why would anyone want to vandalize something so cool?” I ask.

“Why do they take their bikes and ride around on the inside of the hat and mess up the rim of it?” says the other.

“Well,” I say, “that kind of sounds like fun.”

“You’re right,” he says. “That one makes more sense.”

I ask if they’re getting paid by the city to do the painting and they both laugh.

I ask if they know about a market that’s supposed to be going on today and one of them says to the other, “You remember those kids that used to have that swap meet over the summer?”

“Yeah,” says the other, “but I haven’t seen them around here lately. I think they stopped it when the weather got colder.”

\* \* \*

Two years before I attended Seattle’s first ever RRFM, which was held in a basement of a community center. At 25 I think I was the oldest person there. The fifteen or so attendees looked to be between the ages of 18 and 21, and they all seemed to know one other. There was a free yoga class going on in one room and a girl making stencils in the other. When I asked what she was working on, she just said “Stencils” and she didn’t elaborate, nor did she offer to make me one. There was a table set up with some vegan snacks – hummus, soy cream cheese, bread – all from dumpsters. There were a few tables piled with records and clothes and household odds and ends that people could take for

free. I didn't find anything I really wanted or needed, though my roommate came away with a pair of lacy vintage underpants.

I suppose that the whole thing wouldn't have seemed so ridiculous if these Really Really Free Markets that had been springing up in cities across the country hadn't been promoting themselves – on MySpace pages, Wikipedia entries, on various websites and printed fliers – in such grand terms. The site [reallyreallyfree.org](http://reallyreallyfree.org) describes the movement thus:

- \*Because there *is* enough for everyone**
- \*Because sharing is more fulfilling [sic] than owning**
- \*Because corporations would rather see landfills overflow than anyone get anything for free**
- \*Because scarcity is a myth constructed to keep us at the mercy of the economy**
- \*Because a sunny day outside is better than anything money can buy**
- \*Because "free trade" is a contradiction of terms**
- \*Because no one should have to do without food, shelter, entertainment, and community**
- \*Because life should be a picnic, but it only will be if we make it happen**

Perhaps this would be all seem less worrying to me if just last week a 27-year-old friend of friends of mine, a guy named Brady, hadn't turned up at a dinner party with a pamphlet on anarchy – put out by the Eugene, Oregon, “ex-workers collective,” called Crimethinc – and declared it something we all needed to read.

“I'm a rampant anti-capitalist,” he told me, as he sipped from the paper cup of coffee he'd just bought around the corner. (After dinner he would go for another coffee.) Before dinner he invited us all to watch Latin American protest videos on YouTube – “riot porn” he called them. Two days later I ran into him on the bus. We laughed because we were wearing the same sweatshirt. I couldn't help but notice his Dolce and Gabbana eyeglasses and his shoulder bag, emblazoned with the face of Che Guevera.



\* \* \*

A few days later I muster the will to pick up the pamphlet he'd left behind at my friends' place. "Capitalists, socialists, communists exchange products; anarchists interchange assistance, inspiration, loyalty," it declares.

"Sometimes love can only speak through the barrel of a gun."

"There's no Justice – it's just us."

\* \* \*

In a plush chair in the back of the Richard Hugo House's zine library sits a young woman about 20 or 21 years old, wearing cowboy boots, sparkly tights, and a complicated haircut. She's reading a copy of a zine called "Fight the White." She is white. In her lap is a copy of "Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed."

I've come here to look for a copy of "Why Freegan?" which contains the first known printed use of the word "freegan." The zine was distributed, and likely written, by Warren Oakes, the (now former) drummer of Florida-based folk-punk band Against Me! The band's repertoire includes such songs as "Baby, I'm an Anarchist!" and "Cliché Guevara." In 2005 they signed to a major record label and in 2008 they endorsed Obama for president, inducing many of their fans to consider them has-been sell-outs.

The basic idea behind "Why Freegan?" is that freeganism is "the ultimate boycott."

"By not consuming, you are boycotting EVERYTHING! All the corporations, all the stores, all the pesticides, all the land and resources wasted, the capitalist system, the all-oppressive dollar, the wage slavery, the whole burrito! That should help you get to sleep at night."

Though the zine can be found in its entirety on the web, I have decided to pay a visit to the Hugo House's Zine Archive Publishing Project (ZAPP) to see if I can find a hard copy. I also want to check out the largest collection of self-printed, self-published chapbooks zines and journals in the world. I have a feeling that even if I can't find a copy of "Why Freegan?" I'll find plenty of zines that contain the same basic ideas. My hunch proves correct.

A 1992 copy of the Northwest Anarchist Collective asks the question: "Do we want to be blind to the truth and become the materialistic robots the government strives to create?" A caption under a drawing of the Nike swoosh implores: "Class War – Just Do It!" A crudely drawn American flag is doctored with skulls and crossbones standing in for stars, the white stripes filled in with words: "ignorance, greed, power, close-mindedness, self-indulgence, stupidity, slavery, poverty, hunger, death, education, money, religion, TV, laziness, drugs, AIDS."

A 1997 issue "War Crime #5" includes an introduction to the Seattle Black Autonomous Collective ("We don't believe that African/non-white workers in North America or anywhere can receive their freedom under capitalism"), a copy of the Zapatista declaration of war, and a how-to on making tofu.

In a copy of "Urban Hermit" Seattleite Sarah O'Donnell writes about arguing with a group of Hare Krishnas on the bus about why they consider themselves compassionate for being vegetarian, yet stop short of veganism (O'Donnell is vegan). She gives an unemotional account of her roommate's suicide attempt. A trip to San Francisco's Haight Ashbury prompts her to philosophize: "You can be poor and white trash. And you can be poor and not white trash. Can you be a hippie and be white trash?"

The Summer 1996 issue of “Static” begins: “I did an unspeakable thing. A month or so ago, I got a job. Those of you who read the zine regularly will remember in Issue 7 where I had those shitty temp jobs, but stole a lot of cool shit anyway. After a year off, traveling, squatting, drinking, and scamming to get by I decided it was time to work again.”

While a few zines in the “Food and Drink” section shy away from political territory (the zine “Just Nougat” really is about just nougat), most don’t. The 2003 “Zen and the Art of Brownie Baking” by Brandeis University student Josh Russell is a good example. “Most brownies that deviate from the tried and true have gone the way of ritzy bourgeois deserts [sic]. The caviar of the pastry world. It doesn’t need to be that way! We can continue the evolution of brownies in a positive way. It’s time to take brownies back for the masses!”

On the next page Russell apologizes to vegans because some of his recipes contain eggs. He then stresses that if you are going to buy eggs, you should make sure they’re free range and organic eggs. After that he discusses the importance of staying away from “big evil companies” for all other ingredients. “When using things like unsweetened chocolate,” Russell writes, “Hershey’s tastes good. But do you really want to support a huge corporation like Hershey’s? I occasionally do and boy do I feel like a jerk.”

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It was on a small farm just outside Eugene, Oregon, in late July 2008 when the sort of vague feelings of despair I’d been experiencing throughout the spring, and early

summer – the coldest, grayest spring and summer Seattle had experienced in decades – congealed into one of the deepest funks I’d ever found myself in.

I had driven down from Seattle to attend the 2008 Northwest Climate Convergence (third annual), an event organized by the activist group, Rising Tide, an organization can be credited with helping defeat a proposal to build an oil-fired power plant near Asheville, North Carolina and also with attacking neo-liberal New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman with cream pies as he delivered a speech at Brown University.

According to the convergence brochure, “Rising Tide is an international network born out of the conviction that corporate-friendly and state-sponsored ‘solutions’ to climate change will not save us. As a matter of survival, we must decrease our dependence on the industries and institutions that are destroying the planet and work toward community autonomy and sustainable living.” Affiliated conferences apparently took place that summer in Virginia, New York, Quebec, Russia, England, Germany, New Zealand, Denmark and Australia.

I had learned about the event from a young woman named Jay, whom I’d met a month earlier at the Windward Farm intentional community in Klickitat, Washington. Jay didn’t live on the farm, but she hitchhiked there a few times a month from Portland. She was working with Windward’s founder, a 50-some year-old guy named Walt, on developing a type of stove that could turn bio-mass into methanol, and would be presenting a couple of workshops on this at the convergence.

Originally from South Carolina, she had a degree in biology, a charming drawl, and plenty of spunk. She had come out West, she said, because she’d been frustrated by

the lack of political activism and engagement by people back East, and in the South, especially. She told me that there would definitely be plenty of freegan types at the convergence and that I should come down.

I spent only a day and a half at the eight-day event, and much of what I saw there was inspiring. There were probably about 200 people in attendance, and the whole operation seemed to run fairly smoothly. Everything was off-the grid and carbon neutral – cooking was done in some special kind of oven that sequestered the carbon it produced; there were composting toilets instead of chemical-filled port-o-potties; there were no disposable dishes, but an assortment of real ceramic ones and old yogurt containers, and everyone was expected to wash his or her own. Once a day a van that ran on recycled veggie-oil shuttled people back and forth between the farm and Portland. On Saturday night the Portland-based gypsy punk band Underscore Orkestra put on an excellent show; afterward people sang songs around the bonfire. If there was any drug or alcohol use it was discreet.

In some ways the event was a lot of fun. It also seemed a refreshing contrast to the sorts of mainstream environmental conferences where world leaders would fly first or business-class to some exotic locale, dining on five-course meals and sipping martinis while discussing environmental degradation and global poverty.

Workshop topics were diverse and included the practical, the informative, the subversive, the ideological, the paranoid, and the slightly ridiculous. A sampling: Basic Photovoltaic Installation, The Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act, Grassroots Community

Radio, Feminism in Action, Shale Oil in the American West, Basketry and Containers from Local Materials, Street Theatre and Creative Action Visuals (“An introduction to how to incorporate basic theatre and creative art into your protests, and never have a boring protest again!”), The Climate Impacts of Industrial Agriculture, Taking Down Corporations, Climate Change Science, and Healing the Wounds of Civilization (“ a powerful healing ritual to deal with the pain, grief, angst, sadness, frustration, despair, etc. of living in today’s highly civilized world.”)

Many of the attendees were what could be deemed professional protestors, people whose causes were vast and varied – war, forest destruction, sexism, racism, capitalism, globalization, corporations, meat-eating. Some had clearly been in the activist scene for years, speaking of old-growth forest campaigns they’d worked on as members of Earth First!; anti-war protests they’d been in; their experience in Chiapas. Some had participated in the 1999 WTO protests. Many were gearing up to protest the upcoming Republican National Convention in Minneapolis; some were planning to protest the Democratic Convention as well.

Although there were some workshops put on by minorities about minority issues – there was one about indigenous resistance to the upcoming Vancouver Olympics – probably about 95 percent of the convergence attendees were white. Many were under the age of 25 and most were either dreadlocked, heavily tattooed, or both. It seemed to be a bit clique-ish, though some of the participants were aware of this themselves; there was even a workshop called “Losing Your Activist Ego.”

I attended one workshop called “Consensus, Climate Change, & Co-ops,” put on by a 28-year-old named Thomas. The brochure had informed me that this workshop was

supposed to address the questions: “If we don’t like hierarchical decision-making based on property, power, and police, what should we put in its place? If we don’t like waged labor, consumerism or green capitalism what should we put in its place?”

Thomas talked of practices and procedures associated with voting by consensus, something he’d become very familiar with from seven years of living in student housing co-ops in Eugene – how to indicate to the group that you’d like to speak; how to keep minutes; how to wave your fingers in front of your face to show that you “can’t see past your position of white privilege.” He spoke of a factory in Argentina that workers had taken over with the intent of ending all hierarchies, but that resulted (for some reason that “no one is really sure of”) with some workers taking over supervisory or accounting positions and keeping them. He talked of a period during the Spanish Civil War where consensus-based decision making had ruled the land.

After this workshop I attended one called “Ending Corporate Rule,” by a 50-year old woman named Karen Coulter, dressed in a batik-dyed sundress. She had, she said, dedicated more than half her life to saving forests and limiting the scope of corporations. She seemed to make a lot of salient points about ways to limit increasing corporate control – for instance by revoking corporate personhood (which had only come into law in 1886). I also admired that she’d stuck with her causes for so long, and that she did not own a cell phone or a computer. Well, I thought, at least she’s willing to practice what she preaches.

But after her talk she distributed a zine that she had put together with somebody named Asante Riverwind. Called “Composting the Corporations: Weaving Dreams into

Reality,” it full of the sort of humorless vitriol you’d expect from somebody like Ann Coulter. An excerpt from one of Riverwind’s “poems”:

Imagine . . . beyond visualizations,  
Beyond passivity’s  
Daydream fantasies . . .  
Imagine a future, real, viable,  
Achievable’  
birthed from the festering compost  
of corporate society,  
from the industrialized labor pains  
of wage slavery;  
A real future: where land  
Belongs to all relations in common;  
the winged ones, finned ones,  
clawed ones, crawling ones,  
fluttering ones, and walking ones;  
where all have an inherent right  
to be on this earth  
– our common home –  
into which we all are born;  
where each has sovereignty  
over self,  
free from the oppression and bloody conquests  
of “his-story” . . .

That morning I hung out for awhile, chatting with smokers in the designated smoking area. A man in a cowboy hat and a handle bar mustache asked, “Did anyone else see that UFO last night?”

During dinner the night before another man, whom we’ll call Dave, told me that it was no wonder our country was screwed up. Ever since the government had learned to beam messages into people’s brains from outer space, our situation had become pretty much hopeless.



I talked with a 21-year old unemployed, train-hopping kid named Mike from Hickory, North Carolina. For the past few months he'd been living in the backyard of a sort of freegan-punk house in Portland for the last few months. Eventually he hoped to move to a squat, since in his current living arrangement his friends were paying rent.

Mike was tall and skinny with sandy hair, freckles, and prominent front teeth. I found him endearing and easy to talk to.

As we sat around the campfire on Saturday night he and I discussed dumpster diving and radical anarchist philosophy; mostly, though, we just chatted about this and that – music and movies, our families, our mutual distaste for the soggy Northwest weather. “I know some people,” he told me, “who everything they do and say is a political statement. And that can be alienating.” After we had talked for a few hours I felt comfortable enough with him to crack a joke about Dave and his messages from outer space.

“Well,” Mike said, “what do we know? Dave’s a pretty smart guy. He could be right. Sometimes paranoia is a good thing.”

\* \* \*

On the way back to Seattle I gave a ride to a Sierra Club employee named J.P. who told me all about his disappointment at the convergence. He was upset that it didn't focus enough on practical solutions. Like me he was baffled by much of the rhetoric and ideology and wondered how it was related to climate change, the ostensible subject of the event. There had been a display of posters and pamphlets outlining an outstanding number of 9/11 conspiracy theories, many of which I heard repeated by various festival-goers throughout the event.

There had been another table devoted to gender and sexuality issues. One handout was a glossary of terms many of which I learned had been coined in the last few years, and some like “herstory” that I thought had been retired in the days of disco. There was genderqueer, genderfuck, intersex, intergender, transgender, crossgender, ze and hir (gender neutral pronouns).

I both pondered the question of why, if climate change was the imminent threat that I, J.P., and everybody else at the event agreed that it was, why politicize it so much more than necessary? Why bring in so many side issues and muddle everything?

For months I felt haunted by these questions, as well as a few others. When did a good idea devolve into utopist fantasy? When did skepticism turn to paranoia, and when did that paranoia turn general? Where was the line drawn? How would you know if you crossed it?

And most importantly: Did we have *time* for all of this?

\* \* \*

Upon my return to Seattle I contact Desiree to find out what had happened to the Dumpster Divas. I had attended one meeting where we had actually gone diving. We returned with a haul of cheese, bread, vegetables, a few houseplants and cut flowers and had gone back to her place to divide up all the spoils. Everyone had had a fun time and seemed pretty excited by the experience.

But when I return I try searching for the group online and can no longer find it. I send Desiree an email asking about this, and she replies that the group fell apart after only two or three meetings. “There was enthusiasm,” she wrote, “but no real follow through interest.”

\* \* \*

I also call a few stores asking if they will talk to me about dumpster diving.

I ring up the Essential Baking Company and ask to speak with a manager.

“I just want to ask a few questions,” I say, “about, um, your dumpsters, which I know are pretty popular.”

“Yeah,” he says. “I can definitely say something about that. The freegans kind of think that it’s fair game. But we think that it’s pretty nasty really.”

“We do a lot of work here. We work with the local food banks and donate to other non-profits around town.”

He tells me that all the bread that is in the dumpsters is buyback from grocery stores that couldn’t sell it, and that it isn’t of a high enough quality to donate to the food banks. He says that all the dumpster bread will eventually get picked up and taken to farms where it feeds pigs and buffalo.

I ask how long he’s been working at Essential and he says for about a year and a half. Has the amount of dumpster diving increased in that amount of time? I ask. Decreased? Held steady?

He says that it’s mostly been steady, but that it may have gotten a bit more frequent in the past few months.

“It’s all day, every day people coming and going back there.”

He tells me that if he catches anybody back there he’ll try to discourage them from taking bread, but that usually they will just ignore them.

“It’s illegal,” he says.

I tell him that I heard from the police department that dumpster diving was only illegal if the dumpsters are locked and there is a no trespassing sign posted.

He tells me that they've tried both locks and signs to keep people out, but the locks always get cut off and the signs get ripped off or defaced.

He says that he's had refugees come in the shop soliciting for various relief organizations and that the store will often offer them donations.

But he says the dumpster divers are often cut from a different cloth. They're people who want to cut back on their spending, but want to live the same lifestyle they've gotten accustomed to.

"You'll see soccer moms," he says, "who'll back up their SUVs and just load them up."

\* \* \*

For the last two years I've had the word "freegan" on my weekly Google News alert. I think it may finally be time to remove it.

Last week stories included one from the Boston Globe about dumpster-diving Harvard students. The University of Pittsburgh student paper declared that freeganism was "becoming a trend among concerned consumers." Indonesia's Surabaya Post wrote that freeganism might be like a modern-day Western version of Sufism, a religion that opposes greed and rejects materialism.

I wonder, though, if the matter of greed can really be so simple, if perhaps it is often difficult to even recognize.