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The Killing Fields

Up on a tree with our most elusive domestic terrorists—who, in the aftermath of September 11th, don't seem green anymore.

On the morning of June 15, 2000, one of America's most unlikely terrorists awoke in jail, with a gnawing sense that a lousy day awaited him. Incarceration wasn't the problem; in the year and a half since Jeffrey Luers, now 23, had moved to Oregon, he'd been arrested more than a dozen times, mostly for trespassing on federal forests or tangling with cops—so the county jail in Eugene was familiar turf. Indeed, by the time the sun burned off the perennial Northwest fog, Luers had been released and was shuffling off to the Morning Glory Cafe, a vegetarian joint that would seem the very emblem of hippie-dippy Eugene. The dreadlocked waitresses plied him with free food while he mulled what was really bothering him: That night he'd mount his most ambitious assault—a plan that could truly fuck up his life.

After revving himself up on the burn-it-down lyrics of the U.K. anarchist band Conflict, Luers knew he had no other choice. But when he discovered that the car he'd borrowed for the attack had a stick shift—Luers is an automatic kinda guy—he was privately relieved. “Maybe this is my way out,” he told himself. Jeff's friend and accomplice, Craig Marshall, now 28, took the wheel, and around midnight the two packed the car with camping gear—and three bombs they'd fashioned out of gallon plastic jugs, Coleman fuel, sponges, and incense. Before hitting the road, Luers prayed to his animal spirits for protection.

Eco-terrorists tend to hate cars, even if they do drive them: “They are the number one cause of pollution, the number one status symbol of our culture,” Jeff once wrote, but on the way to the Romania Chevrolet Dealership, the steal beasts seemed more malevolent than usual. “We'd lose a car and then another car would take its place, but I remember seeing a car that was following us,” he says. “I thought I was being paranoid, but as the Nirvana song goes, ‘Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not after you.’” At 12:45, they sneaked on to the car lot and took stock of their targets: three brand-new, pickup trucks. Shimmying under the carriage, bomb in hand, Jeff remembers thinking to himself: “Wow. This is it, huh?” For a big portion of my teenage life. I wanted to be a revolutionary, to fight for what I believed in. Here I was doing it—and I felt sad.” By the time the flames ignited, they were back in the car, driving to a market to pick up some beer for their planned camping trip. As they pulled away, Jeff noticed a car U-turn behind them. “That's the car that was behind us this whole time,” he said.

Within minutes, they were surrounded by police cruisers. Jeff turned to Craig and said: “We're going to jail. Gotta cigarette?”

Since he was 16, Jeff Luers has gone by the moniker of Free, and from a glass-enclosed visiting

room in the Oregon State Penitentiary, he chuckles at this irony. In his old life as a garden variety radical activist, Free eschewed mainstream media. Now that he's locked up, he grants audiences to journalists that he and his ad-hoc defense deem worthy. Perhaps because I once lived in Eugene, I pass muster. In the photos of Free circulating around the Internet, he looks like a wild-haired, sunken-eyed forest sprite, but in person, with his shaggy hair, doe-eyes and a smattering of acne on his neck, he gives off the nervous air of a teenager who's been called into the principal's office.

After his arrest, Free, and Craig, AKA Critter, were initially charged with criminal mischief. But within two weeks, Free's one charge had multiplied into 13, and he found himself accused of everything from arson to criminal mischief to a failed arson attempt on a local oil plant. Critter, 28, eventually copped a plea that may have him out of jail in four years. Free wasn't so fortunate. After two trials, last June he was sentenced to more than 22 years in jail. He was 22 years old. Within the scope of one year, Free had gone from being an anonymous soldier in the radical activist movement to being the most infamous eco-terrorist in America. "I'm an example," Free tells me. "And they have me by the balls."

In his boldface role as the martyr of the radical left, Free is a reminder of the power of domestic disturbance, eclipsed by the events of September 11. For five years, a burgeoning community of radicals, most notably the relentless Earth Liberation Front (ELF), have deployed arsonists and vandals to cripple or intimidate companies that they contend "rape" the environment. ELF has claimed responsibility for immolating targets across the country—ski resorts, housing

developments, laboratories—causing \$40 million in damages. These actions horrify mainstream environmental groups. "Such violence doesn't rally anyone to the cause," says Sierra Club spokesman Allen Mattison. "It only alienates Americans who we need to work with us." Even before the World Trade Center disaster, the FBI had identified the ELF as one of the most dangerous domestic cells. Organizations like it are under increased scrutiny as law enforcement questions whether a movement that attacks property might one day graduate to people.

Free never promoted his car-dealership attack as an ELF action. His notoriety has less to do with him or the blaze—which was in his words "pathetic," having been extinguished in 20 minutes and causing less than \$40,000 in damage—than with the fact that he was caught in the first place, *flagrante delicto*, no less.

Law enforcement has also been pathetic in its pursuit of the elves, as members of the ELF are often called. "That's because the ELF is organized into anonymous cells which operate not only independently from the general public but also from one another and from me," explains Craig Rosebraugh, the black-clad hipster who's been the official and de-facto ELF spokesperson since 1997. The ELF can stay shadowy because unlike organizations such as PETA, it has "no internal organization, no membership base, no hierarchy," Rosebraugh says. He only receives news of ELF actions via anonymous communiqués, which he broadcasts to the world at large.

Even if Rosebraugh knows more than he says—and Congress thinks so; last winter he was being subpoenaed to testify on eco-terrorism—it's probably not much. ELF "cells" aren't trained operatives but gangs of radically inclined friends

who get together, have a beer and blow stuff up to make a political point, says Bob Holland, a Eugene police detective who investigates eco-terrorism. “There is no Mr. Big,” he says. What connects the elves is an ideological grab-bag of isms: from anarchism, environmentalism, primitivism and biocentrism, fomented with a belief that capitalism is messing up the earth. Anyone can claim an action under the ELF umbrella provided they follow basic guidelines (cause lots of damage, don’t hurt anyone). Free’s action may not have been officially ELF, but his capture handed law enforcement a real-live bogeyman, and the radical activist movement its first martyr.

Gandhi had the British occupation of India; Malcolm X the insidious racism of the 1950s, but what injustice molded young Jeff Luers? “In third grade, I refused to stand for the pledge of allegiance,” says Free, who grew up in the suburbs of LA. “I didn’t like the symbolism, promising to die for a cloth.” At 14, he was writing letters to Congress, about military spending and poverty, and he’s still angry that his senators blew him off. In his sophomore year of high school, Free brought a gun with him to school, presumably to use on himself. “Looking back now, I see my unhappiness had a lot to do with growing up in a society and culture that places so much emphasis on making money rather than being happy,” he says, toying with his shoelace. At 16, Free discovered punk rock, and declared himself an anarchist, writing the first of many political songs. Sample lyrics: “Fuck your system. Fuck your laws. I won’t support your fascist cause...”

In his evolution from suburbanite to radical anarchist Free follows a well-trod path. Michael Dreiling a professor of sociology at the University

of Oregon and author of *Solidarity and Contention: The Politics of Class and Sustainability in the NAFTA Conflict*, studies the Eugene anarchists, many of whom, like Free, grew up with what Dreiling calls “the middle-class consumer ideal: Get yourself an education, a job, get married, buy stuff, take vacations. Be happy.” To kids like Free, this seems like a Faustian deal, so they rebel. Anarchism provides an ideal salvo against consumerism, and because dogma doesn’t operate in a vacuum, anarchists latch onto the prevailing political issue of their region, Dreiling says. Which in the Pacific Northwest— where the federal government has allowed massive amounts of clear-cut logging—is the environment.

Free’s introduction to environmentalism came after high school, when he took a job canvassing door to door for The Sierra Club. The work was drudgery, but Free met some cool people, learned about the issues, and began to get in touch with a more spiritual side of his convictions. A meeting brought Free to Eugene when he was 19. Though he had no clue about the burgeoning anarchist scene there, something about the town appealed to him. He decided to move, to make “the only and last attempt at a normal life,” he says. The attempt didn’t last long. A month after arriving in Eugene, Free happened upon a slide show about environmental activists who’d forced the government to cancel a timber sale in the Willamette National Forest by blocking logging roads. “That was dull meeting, remembers activist Deane Rimerman (AKA Dirt). “The few people there were just staring at me like I was a TV show. Afterwards, Free came up to me and kneeled down and looked at me with those eyes of his and said, ‘ I want to sit in a tree.’ I thought, you don’t know what you’re asking for.” Within a month, Free was living on a platform 200 feet up in a 500-year-old

fir tree christened Happy, establishing what would become known as The Fall Creek Tree Sit. Over a period of 18 months, he lived in the forest, spending months at a time in the branches, while an ever-changing support team below kept him fed, watered and emptied his makeshift toilet for him.

About six months into the tree sit, Critter arrived on the scene. With his extreme beliefs about nature—"There are too many fucking humans and not enough animals"—Critter told me he and Free immediately clicked. "We got more philosophically aligned," Critter says. "We talked a lot about different kinds of actions. Like tree-sitting, which to me is really passé; it works only for publicity." Free too was growing frustrated. "Our culture is changing the planet as we know it," he wrote. "Species are disappearing, The rich are getting richer, the poor poorer. These are all connected."

Something more had to be done, so, the two hatched a scheme to strike back by blowing up the trucks at the Romania dealership. Free hoped the action would call attention to the evils of pollution, and inspire other radical activists to follow suit. "It wasn't a big leap for me," says Free of his foray into felony. "I've never been non-violent. I just wanted to exhaust all other avenues first. It came time to do this act of revolution."

September 11th may have shell-shocked America but many of Oregon's radicals remain unmoved by such attacks. It wasn't an assault on them. It was an attack on the very state they are fighting. "Anyone in their right mind would realize the United States had it coming," Rosebraugh said as he sipped a cup of tea at a Portland cafe. "I

cheered when the plane hit the Pentagon," Critter crowed. "Those people are in the business of killing people. It was like, sorry, shit happens." Free's somewhat more sensitive. "I truly believe Bin Laden is a horror, but the people he recruits are the peasants who see America as tyranny," he says. "It takes a lot of desperation to be willing to kill yourself in an act of defiance. It takes a lot of desperation to be willing to kill that many people."

This begs the question: Will the radical environmental movement ever get that desperate?

Although eco-terrorists have never caused a fatality, inherent in their actions is a belief that they have the moral high ground and therefore the right to commit violence. "I consider violence harming life or endangering life," Free counters. "I don't think I did either." The ELF's Rosebraugh agrees. "We're talking about destroying property," he says with a note of disgust in his voice.

Their targets aren't sympathetic. In May 2001, the ELF firebombed the laboratory of Toby Bradshaw, a professor of forest resources at the University of Washington, causing damages of about \$4 million. (Free has no connection to that action.) "The ELF said that I was the driving force in genetic engineering in trees," says Bradshaw. He researches hybrid plant species, work that could accelerate the genetic altering of trees but is not itself genetic engineering. "The ELF's knowledge of biology is functionally zero," Bradshaw says. "They don't understand what they're fighting against, but they're not afraid to enforce their fundamentalist beliefs with violence."

Among Free's supporters and detractors in Eugene, there is consensus that his stiff sentence

was meant to send a message. But those 22 years also reflect the idiosyncrasies and bad luck that marked his legal odyssey. Free's arrest came at a time when some in Eugene were growing tired of the city's reputation as an anarchist-haven, a reputation that was seared into the national consciousness at the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle. As Detective Holland put it: "During Seattle, you had this image on TV of a bare-chested, black-hooded guy anarchist, jumping on a car, while a mother and daughter in the car looked on, terrified. That symbolized Eugene." Since then, one former district attorney has said authorities adopted a get-tough-on-anarchists policy.

In this atmosphere, Free was already handicapped. But when his defense lawyer died of a heart attack midway through the trial, prompting a mistrial, it got even worse. After the mistrial, Critter was offered a plea-bargain that could have him out of jail in a year. Free, meanwhile, was offered 12 years. He and his new lawyer rejected the plea, opting for a new trial. As always, Free accepted responsibility for the truck fires but maintained he didn't plant bombs at the oil plant. (The evidence linking him to those bombs, which never went off, was all circumstantial.)

On the eve of Free's second trial, an anonymous group set fire to the same Chevy dealership Free had torched. This fire, however, destroyed 30 SUVs and caused a million bucks worth of damage, and a flurry of negative stories about eco-terrorism ran in the local media.

Free was ultimately found guilty on 11 of the 13 counts—including three counts of Arson 1, which carries a mandatory minimum sentence of 90 months. Free's former lawyer argued that his crime didn't meet the criterion for Arson 1, stressing the fact that no one's life had been

endangered. Even with the mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines, judges have discretion to run sentences consecutively or concurrently, as is common practice with a first-time violent offenders. Free's charges, however, were stacked to 22 years. To put his sentence in perspective, in 1998, an Oregon woman named Tamara Meredith was convicted of setting more than three dozen fires around Southwest Oregon, and she was sentenced to three years in prison. Free is appealing. He is also under investigation again, as two federal grand juries in Oregon attempt to delve further into the realm of eco-terrorists.

Appeal or no, this accidental martyr says he is resigned to living another lifetime in jail. Perhaps that's because right now Free is the darling of the radical environmental movement. His name graces T-shirts; there are benefit concerts to raise money for his legal fund and strangers write him fan letters. But Free says he is so impassive about his prison sentence because he has long sensed his future would be behind bars. "I've always felt that I would come to prison for a long time for something I believed in. It's a sad fate, but even if I'd known the outcome, I would have set the fire anyway." He pauses and adds quietly, "It wasn't a great act of defiance; I just burned a couple of tires on a car. I regret that my parents are probably going to die before they see me free. But I don't regret what I did. I'm proud of that."