

Tucson, Arizona
April 2, 2001
Riot on Fourth Ave.
John All

Duke had won the basketball national championship 82-72 and crushed Arizona's dreams of Destiny. I knew there would be a crowd of people mourning the loss. I have shed tears over my share of Duke defeats and so I knew the crowd would be crushed. The closer you come, the worse the defeat feels for a fan. And Arizona had come damn close; had begun to believe their own hype. After a quick celebratory phone call to my brother, Sara and I headed to Fourth Ave (the only true center Tucson has where people can walk down the street and also the largest gathering of bars in town). We saw many people leaving the area as their disappointment overcame the alcohol in their system. The police were everywhere, conspicuously occupying every major intersection in large clusters. We walked down the street and the palpable sullen rage was overlaid with a heavy dose of melancholy. I was glad I hadn't put on my Duke t-shirt and given the rage the spark it needed to burst into life. Sara was giddy with excitement as we avoided the stumbling drunks and half clad women. She said she finally felt safe walking into a charged atmosphere because she had someone huge by her side. People were generally walking or standing in small groups. Only near the bar O'Malleys (the largest and most popular college bar) was there any conglomeration. Here a maelstrom of people was swirling in the intersection, setting off fireworks and slam dancing. The most incongruous sight was the large number of people using cellular phone and those with video camera filming the action. Never in my past debacles had technology reared its head in this way. The times, they are a changing...

At the north end of Fourth Ave, Sara and I saw an impressive sight. The police had a large reserve of officers: fifty men on motorcycles lined in waves across the street with a dozen squad cars lined up behind them. The engines were running and they were poised for action if the crowd got out of hand. But everyone seemed peaceful and sad. Sara and I quickly saw what we wanted to see and headed home.

Thirty minutes later, I was flipping around on the TV looking for more interviews with Duke players when I saw footage of a massive fire. I stopped to look and unbelievably, I recognized the surrounding buildings as only a few blocks away on Fourth Ave. Had the riot I sort of expected began? When I saw the police on camera firing plastic bullets and throwing concussion grenades, I realized it had. At first, there was a camera man on the street level. The commentator with him said that the police had driven the crowd away to let in the fire trucks but were not now disturbing them. However, I saw this change on the camera as the police began firing at bystanders and even the news media. Clearly the order to fire had been given but not adequate instructions on WHOM to shoot and/or why to shoot at someone. I knew this sort of arbitrary violence on the part of the police was really going to stir things up and so Sara and I headed back towards Fourth Ave.

As we left the house, we could see the glow of the fire and hear the pops and bangs of explosions. I was excited to be heading back into a situation like this and Sara kept repeating that she needed a cigarette. We walked hurriedly towards the glow and then began to run, as we feared we would miss something. There were large numbers of people streaming away from the area but most were huddled on the sides of the streets

watching the glow and wondering what would happen next. Helicopters continually circled with their spotlights trained on the crowd.

We approached one block away from the fire (which was at a smaller bar, The Hut, next to O'Malley's) but a line of police with body armor, full body Plexiglas shields and batons blocked our progress. The police were standing in the street and rhythmically rapping their batons in unison on their shields like something from the movie Zulu. I guess the thumping noise was supposed to intimidate the crowd, but instead it enraged them. Sara bummed her cigarette from a guy standing on the street corner while a guy with no shirt and dreadlocks yelled at the police, calling them fascist bastards.

The crowd was an interesting mix of drunken college student, curious local people from the neighborhood, and indigents who normally line Fourth Ave asking for change. It was this group of able-bodied nonconformists who were relishing the confrontation with the police and the most vocal in expressing their displeasure.

I had walked up to an overturned VW Westphalia before the officers began to move towards me in an ominous way and forced my retreat. There was the lingering odor of tear gas in the air but it was quickly dissipating. The crowd had all been displaced from Fourth Ave and was wandering the alley that runs parallel to it. Sara and I walked down the alley passing drunks and enraged street people and several fires in dumpsters. The police began firing explosives at the intersection we had just left about 90 seconds after we were gone.

The intervening buildings kept us from getting a good view of the fire, but the glow was gone and so I assumed the fire was under control – very quickly considering that it was raging only 5 minutes earlier. At the next intersection, they were firing at people in front of us but hadn't reached the alley yet and so we sprinted across to the safety of the alley on the far side. I thought our best bet would be to walk parallel to Fourth until we were past the police and then we could walk onto the street and see the fire. When we reached Sixth Street, there were still police and I saw my first example of the destruction to businesses – the windows to a record store were smashed and papers scattered on the street. A guy was sitting in front of the store and appeared to be protecting it. Sara and I dashed across Sixth without attracting any gunfire and walked down the alley passing another burning dumpster.

We finally were past the police and crossed a parking lot to reach Fourth Ave. We could see the police blocking Sixth Street half a block away but they were not bothering us here. We stood next to a sushi restaurant on the street. A moment later, people began to emerge from the restaurant behind us. I hadn't realized it earlier, but innocent people were trapped in bars and stores and restaurants by the police brutality. Emboldened by the additional people, I walked to within 50 feet on the cops, reached down and grabbed a cartridge for a huge rubber bullet shotgun. The cartridge was 8 inches long and nearly 2 thick; very impressive. When the nearest cop raised his weapon towards me, I scampered back to the corner of the building and the people closed and locked the restaurant door (to keep out the police!!!).

Soon other people began approaching the intersection, trying to walk home in some cases, yelling at the police in others. The cops had an equal response no matter how reasonable the request or even if people had their arms in the air: they fired upon them multiple times until the people fled. I saw a well-dressed guy holding the hand of a girl (with their hands in the air and asking only to pass) get driven away by the police. I

remained at the edge of the wall because I could see without getting shot at by the cops, when I heard a voice from above yell for us to go home. I looked up and saw snipers on the roof, watching us and waiting for the chance to fire. I ignored him because he was too far away to hit me with a rubber bullet and I didn't think even they were quite ready to use live ammo.

During this entire time, we heard dozens of explosions down near O'Malley's. There was nearly constant action going on there and it was far too brutal for Sara and I to venture into. After a few more minutes, from O'Malley's, we heard the rhythmic thumping of baton on shield as before, but now it was louder and moving. A line of perhaps 75 officers was walking shoulder to shoulder, striking their shields, marching towards us. As they marched, one of the men on the periphery would take a moment and fire at people who got too close and then hurry to catch up to the group. We slowly retreated back to the alley as a helicopter hovered over us for a moment and then moved on to other targets. Fortunately, the police were not moving down the side streets and after they were beyond our parking lot, we moved back to Fourth Ave.

There was another five minutes of calm as I contemplated trying to get another expended shell. But the cops at the intersection were firing more and more frequently at people who were merely watching and so I didn't risk it. We soon heard the pounding again as another group of officers (only 60 this time but with 10 dogs) struck their shields and walked down the street. We again retreated to the alley and this time moved back towards the epicenter at O'Malley's.

The firing had finally died down and so we felt safe enough to return. After a block, we found an unoccupied intersection and Sara and I moved onto Fourth Ave. We walked down the street for a block and saw the shattered store windows. A guy trapped in a bar stuck his head out and yelled, "I wouldn't go that way, the police will fuck you up!" But I wanted to see the fire and so we crept closer. The police were well beyond us now in their line and so we had a few minutes to explore and so walked for a block down Fourth. I gathered up some plastic and wooden bullets and pieces of concussion grenades. There weren't many pieces left as the police picked them up so that the next day their brutality wouldn't be exposed to the world with the evidence of spent munitions. I watched them gather shells up after every shot. Only luck brought a few into my hands.

While I was gathering souvenirs, Sara was righting a broken ficus tree. The tree and pot had been thrown into a store window and broken. I told her the police would shoot at us for looting. So she straightened up the tree and covered it with the remaining dirt and potshards. I told her that the owner would be down the next morning to survey the damage and would take care of it. (Footage of Fourth Ave on the news the next day showed the ficus replanted and OK.)

I managed to walk close enough to the fire to see that it had in fact been put out and that the cops were still running around like ants when the mound is disturbed. Several people had come out of the stores behind us and were shocked at the damage. Then we heard the pounding again. I looked up the street and saw that the police line had reformed and was again marching towards us. The people behind us ran and I slowly began to back away. They fired at someone across the street from me and Sara pulled me into Bison witch, a local restaurant, just before they fired at me. The owner hurriedly locked the door to keep the police out. I saw the police fire at several other people who were merely surveying the damage on Fourth. It felt like we were huddled in a bomb shelter or in a

life raft. A cop hurried over to our restaurant and pounded on the door until it was opened.

“Anyone who leaves this restaurant will be shot. Don’t mess with us, we don’t care who you are and will shoot everyone,” he yelled with a red face. When the owner queried him as to how people should leave to get home, the cop replied, “I don’t care, go out the back way through the alley and if you are lucky, you will not get shot.” He left and the owner quickly locked the door to keep any more police from entering. “What a bunch of assholes” was the consensus.

Most of the people had left the area by this time and Sara and I felt that there was nothing left to see and headed home. The entire walk we passed all manner of people yelling obscenities about the police. We were in a dilemma for the walk home – lighted streets seemed safer in some respects, but more likely to be shot in others. We opted for the lights to avoid running into an overly exuberant officer in a darkened alley who might mistake us for looters. We made it home in safety and watched footage the next day from home.

Note: Dozens of law suits were filed after this night include one student who lost an eye and an 80-year old man who was shot while sitting on his front porch.