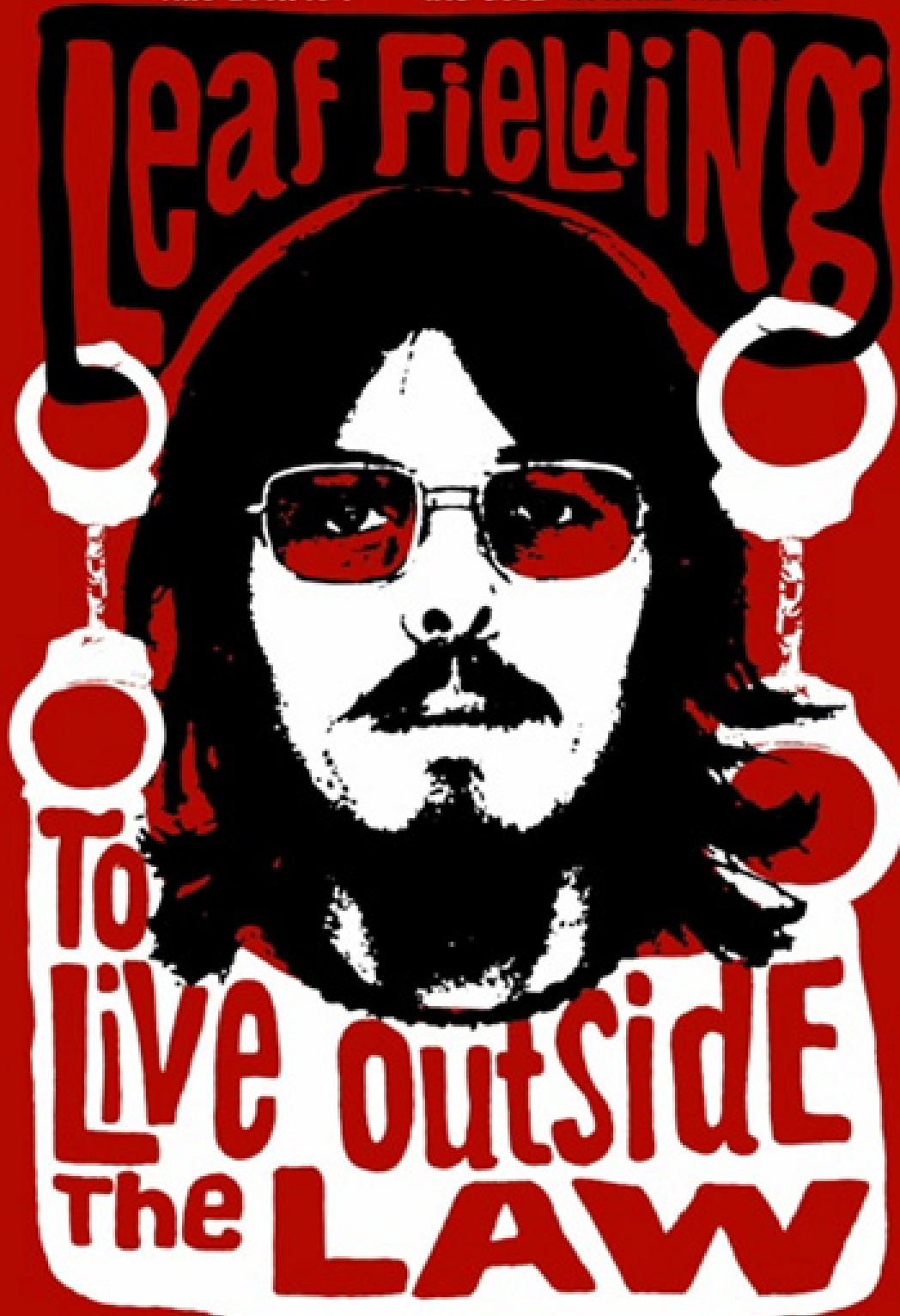


'THIS BOOK IS F***ING GOOD' HOWARD MARKS



CAUGHT BY OPERATION JULIE – BRITAIN'S BIGGEST DRUGS BUST

TO LIVE OUTSIDE THE LAW

Chapter 1.

OPERATION JULIE, March 26, 1977

I woke with a start. The light of a torch lanced the darkness and settled on my face. I raised my hand to shield my eyes and was pinned to the bed by an octopus, hands everywhere.

‘Got him!’ a voice yelled triumphantly.

‘Give us some fucking light! Let’s have a look at what we’ve caught.’

The light came on. Through the spread fingers over my face, I could see I was being held down by several men.

‘What are you doing?’ This was my worst nightmare come true. I tried to turn my head to see what was happening to Mary, but my hair was gripped tightly and I couldn’t move an inch. ‘Let go!’ I yelled.

‘Shut up, cunt,’ someone hissed in my ear. ‘Right then, lads. Let’s be having him.’

They hauled me from the bed and stood me on my feet. Only two were holding me now. The other three stood in front of me, bristling. One of them had drawn a gun. Mary was hiding below the duvet. A grim-looking woman stood at her side of the bed. The stink of sweat and adrenalin hung heavy in the air. The guy on the left, a big unshaven bruiser in a red sweater and jeans, stared hard at me. Triumph and loathing struggled for the upper hand in his expression. Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* peeked incongruously over his shoulder. Without taking his eyes from mine, red sweater barked, ‘Get him his fucking pants and take him below!’

My arms were released so I could take the Y fronts that were thrust at me. When I’d put them on, I was grabbed and frogmarched out of the room and down the stairs.

We were in Mid-Wales, spending the weekend with our friends, Russ and Jan. A dozen men in sweaters and jeans were engaged in ransacking their house. Several uniformed

police stood around watching. A scruffy longhair with a gun guarded the door. I was pushed in front of an older man in a sheepskin coat who stood apart. He cautioned me and asked if I had anything to say.

I stood, fur-tongued and thick-headed. It was dark outside. I looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. Just after five. We'd gone to bed three hours before, full of curry and wine. My head was pounding. I felt as though I might throw up at any moment. Suddenly I desperately needed a shit.

'I've got to go to the toilet.'

'All right.' The boss turned to my escort. 'Watch him! Don't let him close the door. Don't take your eyes off him for one moment.'

I lingered on the pan, trying to get my broken brain to work. Three days ago I'd laid a hundred and twelve thousand hits of LSD on Russ. He was supposed to be passing it straight on. Had he moved it all? Were we stuffed or might we have a chance to get clear?

'Hurry up! There's another one here needs the crapper.'

I washed my hands and splashed cold water on my face, trying to wake myself up. Please let this be a nightmare, I implored the god of events. But it wasn't a dream, it had the stink of reality. As I left the toilet, Russ stumbled in. He looked as bad as I felt. I was handed my clothes and glasses and sent to join Mary, who was dressed, sitting on the sofa and looking at the floor.

'I'm so sorry, honey,' I said, pulling on my trousers.

'Shut up!' my guard shouted. 'No talking.'

Mary's long blond hair was falling over her face, hiding her expression. I sat down and took her hand. Soon we were joined by Russ and Jan. Two uniformed police were detailed to watch us.

'What's going on, Megan?' Jan asked the policewoman.

'I can't say, Jan,' Megan replied, in a strong Welsh accent. 'Sorry love, but we're under instructions. You're not allowed to talk.'

The searchers were swarming all over the house, emptying drawers and cupboards, dismantling anything that came apart. The absence of speech was eerie. Everything was being put into tagged plastic bags. My heart sank as I watched them methodically gut Russ's home.

‘What are you doing?’ Jan shouted across to the man in the sheepskin coat. She was close to hysteria. ‘You can’t treat us like this! I’m expecting a baby...’

Whilst Megan and the constable were trying to calm Jan down, I whispered to Russ.

‘You clean?’

He nodded.

‘Good. Say nothing. We’ll be fine.’

‘Hey!’ the armed hippie on the door screamed at our guards. ‘Stop those buggers talking. Keep them quiet or you’ll be left out in the rain! Got it?’

‘Yessir,’ muttered the local bobby.

I sat on the sofa, my arm around Mary’s shoulder, feeling worse by the minute. Attempting to ward off the sense of hopelessness that was washing over me was like trying to stop the tide. As the plainclothes men systematically took apart Russ and Jan’s home, I felt my life disintegrating. The police ignored us completely. ‘We’ve got you,’ their silence shouted. ‘Now we’re just collecting the evidence.’

Jan started to cry. Megan began weeping too. The policewoman’s tears completely undermined me; I wanted to join in.

‘Fielding!’

I looked up at the sound of my name. Two coppers led me to the kitchen. Red sweater put a handcuff on my left wrist and tightened it with a series of clicks. He attached the other end to his right hand.

‘Come on. Let’s go,’ he said, tugging at the cuffs. Metal handcuffs cutting at the wrist bone; that’s the feel of being a prisoner.

‘What’s going on?’ I asked red sweater as we drove south towards Carmarthen. It was as if I hadn’t spoken. I tried again. ‘Where are we heading?’

Neither he nor the driver would reply to my questions. I gave up and looked out the window at the early signs of the spring – a spring I suddenly realised I was going to miss. The thought stung like acid thrown in my face. My eyes were smarting, but I didn’t want them to see me cry.

In silence we crossed the Severn Bridge and headed east down the M4. I looked sightlessly out of the window while a crowd of questions assailed my mind. How long

would they hold Mary for? What could I possibly say the next time I saw her? When would that be? Then I began worrying about how Russ was going to cope with the questioning. And how would I manage? Why had I been taken off alone? Had they got any of the others? I clung to the hope that they hadn't.

It hit me that this was going to be a terrible blow to my Dad. Though retired from the Army, he was still working in Whitehall. I'd embarrassed him several times before, but nothing to compare with this. He thought my wild hippy days were in the past, now that I'd settled down with a lovely girl. I had a respectable livelihood running a health food business and spent my spare time in the garden with my vegetables, chickens and bees. That was all true, but it was only part of it.

The fact was I'd been so affected by my first LSD trip that it had altered the whole course of my existence. I'd been turning people on to acid for ten years.

The driver took the Swindon exit and pulled up outside the police station. My tenants, a blameless young couple who rented the flat above my wholefoods shop, were leaving the building? Why on earth were they here? I was able to delay my departure from the car so I emerged just as they passed.

'What happened?' I asked.

They didn't have a chance to reply; the moment I spoke the two policemen ran me inside. At the desk, I was booked by a sergeant. He added my name to the list of cell-occupants on the blackboard. I recognised Henry and Brian immediately. The flickering flame of hope I'd been nursing was blown out. They'd got us.

'Give me your glasses and belt,' the sergeant said.

'What? Why?' I asked.

'Stop you trying to kill yourself with them.'

The cell door slammed shut behind me. My connection to the rest of the world was instantly severed. I was alone, in the hands of my enemies. Until now I'd been trying to convince myself that I was somehow going to slide out of this situation, but in a cell it's almost impossible to think positively.

The brightly-lit cube was small enough for me to see well, even without my specs. The walls were glossy and bare. There was a toilet, a concrete bed and nothing else. A

small window, made of glass bricks, admitted a dim underwater light. I stood on the bed and put my face to the glass. I couldn't see anything clearly.

The air was rank with the sour smell of fear. Was that me? I sniffed my armpit. I stank. Smelling my body made me aware of the cell's ghosts, all the frightened people who'd been locked up in this cramped space. Needing to move, I walked three paces up, turned, took three paces back, turned... After a while I sat on the bed. Before long I was lying down, crying helplessly. I cried for Mary and for my friends in the adjoining cells, but mostly I cried for myself. What a mess. What a horrible bloody mess!

Eventually I cried myself out and lay, clothed in the rags of despair, dreading the interrogation that must be coming. The leaden minutes sank out of sight, one by one. Finally, the key turned and the door opened. I clenched my fists and stood to face my questioners.