

THE PLOT AGAINST OCCUPY

**HOW THE
GOVERNMENT
TURNED FIVE
STONER
MISFITS INTO
THE WORLD'S
MOST HAPLESS
TERRORIST
CELL
BY SABRINA
RUBIN ERDELY**

THUNDER RUMBLED AND RAIN PAT-
tered on the leaves as Connor Stev-
ens tramped through the darkness
down a wooded path to the base of
the Brecksville-Northfield High Level
Bridge. A sad-eyed 20-year-old poet
from the Cleveland suburbs, Stevens
was crouched in the foliage, his baby face ob-
scured by a bushy lumberjack's beard.

Beside him ducked two friends from Occupy Cleve-
land – the group that had come to define Stevens and

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN RITTER



his place in the world – both as gaunt and grungy as Stevens himself. Farther up the trail, Stevens knew, three other comrades were acting as lookouts. Gingerly, the young men opened the two black toolboxes they'd carried down from their van. Inside were eight pounds of C4 explosives.

They were actually going through with it. The six of them were going to blow up a bridge.

That they were on the brink of something so epic was surprising, even to the crew, a hodgepodge of drifters plus a pair of middle-class seekers: quiet Stevens and puppyishly excitable Brandon Baxter, also 20. Anarchists who had grown disenchanted with the Occupy movement, which they considered too conservative, they yearned to make a radical statement of their own – to send a message to corporate America, its corrupt government and that invisible grid underlying it all, the System. They'd joined Occupy Cleveland in the fall, but

over the winter they'd waited in vain for the group to pick a direction before finally taking matters into their own hands. For weeks they'd fantasized about the mayhem they'd wreak, puerile talk of stink bombs and spray paint that had anted up to discussion of all the shit they'd blow up if only they could. But the grandiosity of their hopes stood in stark contrast to their mundane routine. They spent their days getting stoned at their Occupy-subsidized commune

in a downtown warehouse, squabbling over dish duty and barely making their shifts at the Occupy Cleveland info tent; when they managed to scrounge up a couple of cans of Spaghettios for dinner, it was celebrated as an accomplishment. If not for the help of their levelheaded comrade Shaquille Azir, who at this critical moment stood as lookout, hissing, "How much longer is this gonna take?" the plot might never have come together.

The boys anxiously fiddled with the safety switch on one of the IEDs. Even on this April night, as they planted two bombs, the plan felt slapdash. No one knew how to handle the explosives. They had no get-away plan. At one point they'd discussed closing the bridge with traffic cones to minimize casualties – 13,000 vehicles

Contributing editor **SABRINA RUBIN ERDELY** wrote "The Gangster Princess of Beverly Hills" in *RS 1164*.



A CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER?

The five seekers and drifters who met at Occupy Cleveland could never have planned an attack without the help of an FBI informant: (1) Baxter was a naive, mentally unstable kid, (2) Stevens a shy, gay poet, (3) Hayne a petty crook, (4) Stafford a devoted Juggalo, and (5) Wright a punk-rock roadie.



crossed the bridge daily – but there was no mention of that now. Some of the accomplices weren't even clear on the evening's basic agenda. "Do we plant tonight and go boom tomorrow?" Baxter had asked in the van. "No, we're going to detonate these tonight," someone had clarified.

The red light on the other IED winked on, signaling it was armed. "One is good to go," Stevens announced. "We just gotta do this one." A night-vision camera mounted nearby captured the boys' movements as they hunched around the second IED until its light shone. Then all six jogged back to the van, relief in their voices. "We just committed the biggest act of terrorism that I know of since the 1960s," Stevens said, as a recording device memorialized every word. All that was left now was for the boys to pick a location from which to push the detonators and go boom. They were feeling pretty good. They decided to go to Applebee's.

NOTHING WAS DESTINED to blow up that night, as it turns out, because the entire plot was actually an elaborate federal sting operation. The case against the Cleveland Five, in fact, exposes not just a deeply misguided element of the Occupy movement, but also a shadowy side of the federal government. It's hardly surprising that the FBI decided to infiltrate Occupy; given the movement's challenge of the status quo and its hectic patchwork of factions – including ones touting subversive agendas – the feds worried it could become a terrorist breeding ground. Since 9/11, the federal Joint Terrorism Task Force has been charged with preventing further terrorist attacks. But anticipating and disrupting terrorist plots require both aggressive investigative techniques and a staggering level of collaboration and

sources; to pull together the Cleveland case alone, the FBI coordinated with 23 different agencies. The hope, of course, is that the results make it all worthwhile: The plot is detected and heroically foiled, the evildoers arrested, and the American public sleeps easier. The problem is that in many cases, the government has determined that the best way to capture terrorists is simply to invent them in the first place.

"The government has a responsibility to prevent harm," says former FBI counterterrorism agent Michael German, now the senior policy counsel for the ACLU. "What they're doing instead is manufacturing threatening events."

That's just how it went down in Cleveland, where the defendants started out as disoriented young men wrestling with alienation, identity issues and your typical bucket of adolescent angst. They were malleable, ripe for some outside influence to coax them onto a new path. That catalyst could have come in the form of a friend, a family member or a cause. Instead, the government sent an informant.

And not just any informant, but a smooth-talking ex-con – an incorrigible lawbreaker who racked up even more criminal charges while on the federal payroll. From the start, the government snitch nurtured the boys' destructive daydreams, egging them on every step of the way, giving them the encouragement and tools to turn their *Fight Club*-tinged tough talk into reality. To follow the evolution of the bombing plot under the informant's tutelage is to watch five young men get a giant federal-assisted upgrade from rebellious idealists to terrorist boogymen. This process looks a lot like what used to be called entrapment. And yet this is how the War on Terror is being fought at home today.

Before 9/11, German says, the FBI would have considered the idea of advancing terrorism plots just to defuse them as "laughable. But what was justified as an emergency method has become a normalized part of regular criminal-justice work." All too often, agents rely on informants who pump up criminal plans to comic-book-villain proportions. It's a tactic that's been used repeatedly to convict Muslims of being domestic Islamic terrorists, like the four men in Newburgh, New York, convicted in 2010 of a plot to shoot down military jets – a plot engineered by an informant who provided them with a fake Stinger missile.

Now this same strategy is being used to ensnare homegrown political activists. Environmental crusaders have fallen prey, including Eric McDavid, sentenced in 2008 to 20 years for conspiring to blow up a dam, even though it emerged at trial that a driving force behind the scheme was an FBI informant named "Anna." And anarchists are increasingly in the crosshairs, especially as they've become more visible with the rise of Occupy Wall Street. In

a May sting at the Chicago NATO summit, three anarchists were charged with plotting to use Molotov cocktails on police stations and Mayor Rahm Emanuel's home – accusations that defense attorneys call "propaganda," contending the bomb ingredients were provided by undercover agents.

"These tactics are beyond the pale for what could be seen as a legitimate anti-terrorism operation," says *Green Is the New Red* author Will Potter, who tracks government crackdowns on activists. "But this is how the Bureau is spending their counterterrorism money, and thousands of man-hours: creating the terrorism plots that they are ostensibly preventing."

"THE GOVERNMENT HAS A RESPONSIBILITY TO PREVENT HARM," SAYS ONE FORMER FBI AGENT. "BUT INSTEAD THEY'RE MANUFACTURING THREATENING EVENTS."

WHEN CONNOR STEVENS arrived at Occupy Cleveland's tent city on October 9th, 2011, it was with the electric knowledge that he was exactly where he belonged. Wearing a second-hand sweater he'd found at the donation tent, he gazed with amazement around the encampment of 100 people, swept up in the camaraderie: Everyone here was an ally, working for a common goal. The mood was infectious. His friend Brandon Baxter from nearby Lakewood, as hyper as Stevens was introverted, was rushing around the plaza, already Occupy's most eager evangelist. "Hi, I'm Brandon!" he'd say, approaching every onlooker in sight. "Can I talk to you about Occupy Cleveland?" For the moment, Stevens was content to stand on the sidelines and beam his gapped-toothed grin, taking it all in.

"From the minute he got there, Occupy consumed his life," recalls his sister Brelan. "He wanted to fix the whole world."

Stevens had long been smitten with radical ideology – inspired by the Communist Manifesto and the Black Panther Party, concerned for the plight of the poor – and he was determined to cultivate an appropriate political identity. To that end, he

had recently decamped from his mom's home in the Cleveland suburb of Berea to a Christian-anarchist commune in the rough neighborhood of Detroit-Shoreway, shedding his bourgeois trappings to live as Jesus did: with few possessions, serving others, and questioning the establishment. His sister attributes Stevens' independent spirit to their parents' influence: "They're Christian, but adamant about us having our own thoughts and opinions, being aware of the world outside."

Serious and thoughtful, Stevens called himself the Bearded Bastard, projecting an air of mellow masculinity with his facial hair, flannel shirts and a pipe he smoked semi-ironically. With his Hemingwayesque image, it took people by surprise to discover that Stevens was gay (though he politely insisted on the more properly radical term "queer"). More readily apparent was that Stevens was a walking wound with an aura of sadness, who wrote poetry as his way of grappling with "the meaning of suffering." He was a welcome addition to the commune, which called itself Agape House: a condemned building with graffiti-covered walls, where residents stayed up after Bible study drunkenly discussing the works of Howard Zinn and hosting rowdy punk-rock shows. Stevens spent his days as a guerrilla gardener, coaxing greenery from the city's vacant lots as a form of populist protest. "No war but grass war," he'd say, pulling weeds.

"Connor is the gentlest, sweetest person around," says his friend Katie Steinmuller.

His demeanor hadn't always been so chill. Before dropping out of Berea High School in 10th grade, intent on "unschooling" himself, he'd founded a militant student group called Fighters for Freedom, disrupted a job fair where the Army was recruiting, and e-mailed a sergeant to call him a "fascist pig." His loathing of law enforcement had begun at age nine, when his father was arrested for touching the breasts and buttocks of two 10-year-old girls; Dad pleaded guilty, served seven months in state prison, and remains a registered sex offender. Young Connor became enraged not at his father, but at the men who had taken his daddy away. "I developed a keen hatred for authority, 'order' and especially 'law,'" he later wrote. "The simple fact that they can put you in handcuffs and haul you off was enough for me to hate them at that adorable age."

His father's conviction changed everything for the fracturing Stevens family. Connor's mother, Gail, who had been a stay-at-home mom to her five children, suddenly had to support them, and her absence while working long hours as a medical assistant further stoked Connor's fury. Police in their town of 19,000 finally decided to have a chat with his mom after fielding a complaint about 15-year-old Connor's MySpace page, where he'd

PREVIOUS PAGE: PHOTOS IN ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID MAXWELL/LEPA/LANDOV; FBI; 2: COURTESY OF JUSTINE STREHLE; THIS PAGE: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: BRANDON BLACKWELL/FBI; 3: COURTESY OF THE STEVENS FAMILY

posted the Unabomber's Manifesto and screeds urging readers to "KILL COPS! YEA, THE PIGS IN BLUE ARE THE FASCISTS WE HAVE TO FIGHT!!!" "Gail says Connor is not a violent person but has very strong beliefs and is immature about it," the police report noted. "She is working with him about how he comes across." He evidently listened to his mother, coming to embrace pacifism. "One of our major principles was nonviolence," says Zachy Schrauff, who shared a room with Stevens at Agape House. "We became brothers in Christ and all that shit."

It was while living at the commune and working at the anti-war kitchen Food Not Bombs that Stevens met fellow volunteer Brandon Baxter, who was hurling himself into the activist life with the energy of someone discovering a cool new band. With his bright blue eyes, earnest intensity and radical garb – camo jacket, bio-hazard patches, black bandanna around his neck – Baxter looked like a post-apocalyptic Boy Scout as he stood on the corner of 25th and Lorrain shouting, "Free food!" Baxter was psyched to be doing something constructive – psyched, really, just to be out of his hometown of Lakewood, an inner-ring suburb where he'd been rudderless since finishing high school. His quest to fit in somewhere had already taken one reckless turn when, wanting to connect with his German heritage, he briefly joined a neo-Nazi group. ("Brandon doesn't know anything about the world," says his sister Rachael Garcia. "He's very impressionable.") He'd been just as enthused upon realizing that his father, absent much of his childhood, was infatuated with Native American culture; Baxter had attended powwows and absorbed the culture so fully that new friends believed him to be part Indian. His newest incarnation as anarchist dogooder suited him fine. Hearing about Occupy Cleveland's dawning days, Baxter had encouraged Stevens to check it out with him. "Let's have a revolution!" Baxter crowed.

Few places in America were in as dire need of change as Cleveland. In 2010, *Forbes* named it the country's most miserable city; its recession had been under way for a decade, with jobs vanishing and unemployment and homelessness skyrocketing. Stevens and Baxter were ready to be part of the solution, and they vigorously dived into Occupy. They attended study groups on horizontal decision-making and the principles of anarchism. It was a lot to absorb. "Within the first day it was so much information that my mind was bogged," Stevens told a documentary filmmaker who showed up at the tent city.

The boys' inexperience and political naiveté were instantly apparent. "They were not well-informed," says Sam Tyl-icki, a longtime anarchist in Cleveland.

"Their hearts were in the right place, but they were new to everything. They saw the world not making sense but didn't know exactly what to do about it." Stevens and Baxter were stung to find themselves relegated to grunt work – kitchen duty, night watch. Deepening their hurt, the old-guard liberal contingent swiftly took the reins of Occupy Cleveland's discussions, rejecting the suggestions of the younger, more radical crowd. A suspicious rift opened between the two groups. Anarchists complained about Occupy's timidity, and jealously referred to its core members as the Power Circle.

Tensions came to a head when the city gave Occupy Cleveland an October 21st

THE FBI INFORMANT PROVIDED THE BOYS WITH JOBS, HOUSING, ALCOHOL, DRUGS AND EIGHT POUNDS OF C4 PURCHASED ON A LAYAWAY PLAN.

deadline to remove its tents, and the two factions clashed over how to proceed, with liberals tempted to comply and radicals like Stevens and Baxter insisting on standing their ground and getting arrested en masse. At 10 p.m. on the appointed night, as a crowd of 500 gathered and police arrived in riot gear, a staged bit of symbolic protest unfolded: Eleven volunteers preapproved by the Power Circle were peacefully arrested. Then everyone packed up their tents and dispersed. "This is bullshit – fuck this!" the radicals grumbled, stalking off in a huff. The glory days of Occupy Cleveland had lasted less than three weeks. For Baxter and Stevens, the movement that had jolted them with optimism and purpose felt like a crushing disappointment.

SOMEONE ELSE WAS THERE the night of the arrests. Shaquille Azir stood in the crowd, checking out the scene. He was 38, with ears that jutted from his bald head, a double chin and an imposing presence – six feet five, 350 pounds – a physique he described on his MySpace page as having "some extra baggage." Azir homed in on the mad-looking, bandanna-clad dudes waving anarchist flags. He

approached one, a 26-year-old with a black mohawk and a pitted face named Doug Wright. Wright was a lifelong train-hopper who told friends he'd hitched his way across 40 states and once worked as a roadie for the garage band the Scurvies; his status as a real-deal gutterpunk inspired respect among younger Occupiers.

Wright was fired up that night. He bragged to Azir that his missing teeth and crooked nose were from past riots. He added that if he went back to jail, he wouldn't be out for a while. (In fact, Wright did have a history of violence, having served time in New Orleans for aggravated assault.) Soon Azir was listening to Wright bitch about Occupy.

Wright confided that he suspected the Power Circle was in cahoots with the government; he'd already told them so, shouting, "You're gonna get us sent to FEMA camps!" He was ready to start some real shit – like detonating a smoke grenade as a diversion, then pulling down the bank signs from the tops of Cleveland's towers. "Wright was still in the planning phase and was unsure how they would go about bringing down the signs," an FBI report reads. "Wright stated that... they need to make sure everyone knows that the action was against corporate America and not just some random acts."

Azir listened with studious sympathy. It was a technique honed over the course of his devious, dishonest life. His name had once been Kelvin Jackson, before he'd spent three years in state prison for robbing a bank, using a toy gun, while his girlfriend and their baby waited in a cab outside. His rap sheet also included cocaine possession, receiving stolen property, forgery, theft and passing bad checks. That was Azir's thing, writing worthless checks – a "crime of dishonesty," as it's known, a conviction used as evidence of a person's untruthfulness, the sort of thing that can cripple your job prospects or undermine your credibility in a court of law. In the eyes of the FBI, however, Azir's crimes had posed no impediment. Months earlier they had hired him as an informant, finding his leads fruitful enough that they'd opened several investigations, paying him \$5,750, plus \$550 in expenses.

Azir needed the cash. He owned a construction company that rehabbed houses, Desdy Property Group, which he bragged earned him \$75,000 a year. But in reality he had been fending off foreclosures, the state tax department and lawsuits from stiffed contractors and people to whom he had written worthless promissory notes; he had been on the losing end of tens of thousands of dollars' worth of civil judgments. Seeking financial shelter, Azir had filed nine attempts at bankruptcy. Now, as he sat across the table from boastful Doug Wright, Azir was on the verge of

being busted in two more bad-check cases – placing him on probation, for which the FBI would take him off its payroll. Azir needed to prove his value to the feds, and fast.

Which might explain why over the next three months, Azir kept in touch with Wright, even when Wright showed no sign of action. In February, Azir and Wright met for breakfast to discuss the issue: Did Wright still want to bring down those bank signs? Sure, Wright answered. Explaining that he had drifted away from his Occupy friends, he told Azir he wanted to touch base with them first and see what they thought. He would begin with his buddy Brandon Baxter.



INFILTRATING OCCUPY
Desperate to stay on the FBI payroll, ex-con informant Shaquille Azir (above) targeted the homeless kids from Occupy Cleveland (left).

BY THIS TIME, BAXTER wasn't doing so well. Even though he'd been trying his hardest to play his role as Occupy Cleveland's slogan-shouting cheerleader, the group was rapidly disintegrating. One big reason was that its members had nowhere to meet: Since the loss of the encampment, Occupy's presence had been reduced to a single information tent on Public Square – too chilly a gathering space in winter, especially when the gusts coming off Lake Erie whipped through the plaza and caught the tent like a windsock. For a short time, Occupy had rented a 10-by-15-foot office in a downtown high-rise, but Baxter and others had swiftly moved in with their sleeping bags and got the group evicted.

Therein lay Occupy Cleveland's other problem: Its thinning ranks were dominated by homeless teenagers. "They had no place to go," says Leatrice Tolls, a veteran activist who became Occupy Cleveland's maternal figure. "These were kids that were very lost, and needed a place to get fed and sleep." Still, homeless teens were better than no members at all, and Occupy was anxious enough to keep them that there was talk of renting a space for them to live – like a new incar-

nation of Agape House, which had disbanded for lack of funds.

"It's just so hard to sleep outside," Baxter complained to his friends. He was loath to return to Lakewood, the site of his traumatic childhood, where a restraining order barred him from his mother's house. Such a constant font of positivity was Baxter that few realized he had grown up in a household his sister Rachael Garcia calls violent. "He was very fragile as a child," she says. "He was so sensitive. He'd come to me every day, crying," given to nervous tics, doodles of people hanging in nooses and writing violent poetry. "In my deepest darkest fantasies [sic] I see myself as evil," he wrote,

"lacking all reason and empathy spilling the blood of the innocent."

When Baxter was 17, the stress had reached an apex. Believing his stepfather had beaten his mother, Baxter pulled a kitchen knife. "Cut me if you're going to cut me!" the stepdad urged, before Baxter sliced the knife across his chest. Baxter did a stint in a psych ward, says Garcia, after which he was legally forbidden from coming within 500 feet of his stepdad, and maintained little contact with his mom. Instead, he'd moved in with his biological father, a tense, out-of-work roofer whom he barely knew.

Occupy had been Baxter's escape hatch. Now he reluctantly returned to his father's home, which the bank was trying to foreclose on. Dad was scraping payments together by selling Native American handicrafts online. Baxter continued to faithfully walk or bike the seven miles into Cleveland for Occupy's meetings. Late one February night, furious with himself at his inability to somehow repair a broken world – or even his own broken life – Baxter had what he called a "mental break." He leapt in front of a moving car, shouting, "Kill me!" Police responding to the driver's 911 call found Baxter standing on the railing of the Hilliard Bridge, looking down onto the lanes of traffic below and screaming incoherently. The cops talked Baxter into

coming down, then tackled him as he tried to flee. He had a 10-and-a-half-inch knife in his coat and a smaller one in his pants pocket. Charged with carrying a concealed weapon, he was sent to Lakewood Hospital for a psychiatric evaluation. On his way out of the police station, Baxter gave officers the finger, yelling, "Fascists!"

Days later, Wright and Azir picked Baxter up from his dad's house and took him to lunch at a Lakewood restaurant. They wanted to talk about fucking shit up – for Occupy's sake. Baxter was in.

They brainstormed and discussed possible targets, like a bank. Or Cleveland's new casino, during its grand opening. Or what about the G8 in Chicago, or the Republican convention? At one point Wright mentioned explosives, but dismissed it as too costly. They kept on talking.

Flash-forward a month to late March. The group was still dithering. It had made only one decision: That its action should coincide with May Day, when Occupy was calling for a national day of protest. Wright had finally downloaded *The Anarchist's Cookbook*, which he'd been talking about doing forever, and which he hoped would jumpstart their imaginations: "We can make smoke bombs, we can make plastic explosives," Wright said in his gravelly voice, laughing. "It teaches you how to pick locks. It does everything."

At the word "explosives," Azir perked up. "How much do we need?" he stammered. "How much money we need to make explosive – make the plastic explosives?"

"I'm not sure," Wright said. "I haven't read too much yet."

"Well, you gotta get with me," Azir persisted. "If we gonna be trying to do something in a month, you need to get with me as soon as possible on how much money we gonna need, and the materials that we gonna need. Tell me what all we need to make the bombs." The very next day, Azir met with Wright to float a remarkable proposal: Now that they were broaching the topic of explosives, was Wright determined to make the bombs from scratch – or should they just buy some C4 from a guy Azir knew?

Days later, Wright and Baxter were standing with Azir in the kitchen of one of his vacant properties, agog as Azir's arms-dealer friend laid out an array of batons, tear gas and gas masks before them. Wright and Baxter excitedly asked about ordering some riot gear. The arms dealer – in reality, an undercover FBI agent – pointed to a picture of explosives and asked if they would need "the heavy stuff."

"Yeaaaaah, we're gonna wait on that," Wright sidestepped. He repeated his

disinterest in explosives two days later, when the undercover agent phoned – and then again the next day, when Azir prodded him about it. Wright explained that they were flat broke, without money to afford even the riot gear, much less the explosives.

Azir had a solution. He gave them jobs.

EVERYBODY AT THE WAREHOUSE – Occupy Cleveland's commune where anyone who worked a shift at the information tent earned a space – agreed that Baxter and Wright's boss sounded way cool. Since the boys didn't have a car, Azir picked them up for work each morning and drove them to the day's construction site. He gave them beers all day long. And when he dropped them off at the Warehouse each night, they came in bearing cases of beer, baggies of pot and Adderall – all procured with the help of Azir, they said.

Stevens had joined the conspirators not long after they met with the arms dealer, in part because of the lure of a job. "Scratch my back, it hurts!" Stevens would cry out as he burst through the door of the Warehouse, skin burning from handling fiberglass insulation. He was proud to be employed for the first time, even if his pay was only five bucks an hour. "Just getting home, boss is gonna get here at nine to start it all over again," Stevens would text his sister near midnight, before zipping into his winter coat to get some sleep.

Rest was near impossible in their freezing-cold living space. The Warehouse was a cavernous indoor tent city for a dozen or so residents – mostly young men – who stayed up till all hours drinking 40s, playing guitar and arguing over cigarettes. There were no rules, no respect for personal space, no working stove and almost no heat. The place was filthy, with dishes stacked so high in the kitchen that someone just moved the pile into the bathroom.

The chaotic atmosphere wore down Stevens. "I don't feel spiritually right," he complained to a friend. He was frustrated with the stagnancy of Occupy Cleveland, whose entire existence was now staked to round-the-clock staffing of a tent that no one even visited. Stevens was attending church weekly. He told his sister he thought God might be calling him to the ministry.

And yet at the same time, Stevens was also busy trading ideas with Baxter, Wright and Azir about what to bomb. Some friends wonder if Stevens initially joined to talk his comrades out of the plot: "He's a deeply moral guy," says Occupy Joe Ziff. "I have a hunch that he may have gone along in the hopes that he could

stop it." Whatever Stevens' reasons, from the moment Azir had brought his arms-dealer friend into the picture, the conversation had definitively shifted to talk of explosions. The friends discussed attacking a KKK headquarters, then dismissed the plan as lacking a deeper message about the one percent. Baxter mentioned blowing up a bridge, which earned a vote from Azir – "Gotta slow the traffic that's going to make them the money" – but then Baxter backpedaled, concerned that the media might not portray the action in a positive light. Stevens suggested targeting mines or oil wells. Wright joked that if he got drunk enough he might wear a suicide



RALLYING FOR THE CLEVELAND FIVE

Since the boys' arrest, the Occupy community has rushed to their defense.

vest; Baxter confided that once he would have been willing to do that, but no longer. He'd gotten himself a girlfriend now – fellow Warehouse-dweller Justine Strehle, an 18-year-old who wore fuzzy hats with animal ears – and was mooning with new love.

Azir implored them to decide. "What are we going to do with the stuff we got?" he asked. "We're on the hook for it."

"We've got eight fucking pounds of C4," Wright said in disbelief.

It was true. The "arms dealer" had been remarkably flexible about payment, allowing them to place an order for eight bricks of C4 plastic explosives, vests, tear gas and gas masks for \$900, only half of which would be due upon receipt; if they couldn't come up with the additional \$450, the dealer would even allow Wright to work off the debt. Stevens was worried that the C4 salesman could be a cop, but Azir vouched for him, saying if it made Stevens feel better, he'd personally meet with the guy when it came time for the buy. Now, as Azir wouldn't stop reminding them, they needed to come up with something to blow up in time for May Day: "We're 10 days away – if you guys are going to do something, let's put together a plan!"

The guys in the crew put on their thinking caps. They could turn the C4 into depth charges and throw it into a river to sink a

ship. Would that work? Or they could blow up the Cleveland Justice Center. Better still: They would blow up the Federal Reserve Bank. But wait – where was the Federal Reserve, anyway? Discussions were endless. So fantastical did their schemes seem to Baxter that he proposed they throw tacks out the window of their getaway car, to foil would-be pursuers.

Azir was fed up with their bumbling indecision. "Did you follow up on anything? What are we doing? Because as usual you got me on a stupid-ass holding pattern," he scolded. "Every time we meet, we leave saying we're going to do some research and then we get back together and we're back to square one!"

The boys had come to look up to Azir, one of the few adults in their lives. "This guy portrayed himself as a father figure," says Occupy's Sam Tylicki. "He provided them work, provided them drugs, provided them with alcohol, provided them housing." Azir, aware of their miserable living situations, had offered to let the guys squat in one of the empty apartments he was rehabbing, an opportunity that Wright and Stevens took him up on. They were grateful to Azir, who even proposed to pay for identical tattoos for all of them, branding them as their own little gang for life.

The buy, which took place on April 29th, was simple. Azir, Wright, Baxter and newly drafted crew member Tony Hayne – who had a rap sheet for theft and domestic violence – drove to a hotel room in nearby Warrensville, where they snapped on latex gloves and blasted the TV in an attempt to foil any recording devices in case the guy was a cop. Wright threw \$450 in cash on the bed. The undercover agent handed over a duffel bag full of riot gear, along with two black boxes containing decoy bombs that looked like real IEDs. He explained how to arm them and how to detonate each with a cellphone. Then they were on their way.

Driving back to Cleveland, Azir asked if they were all in for the plan, which would take place the next night. Wright replied yes, except for Stevens, who had skipped out on the buy for a reason: He didn't want to go through with it after all. Azir told Wright to have Stevens call him.

Later that day, amid performances and speeches at an Occupy festival next to City Hall, Stevens was even quieter than usual. He'd been acting weird for a few weeks – by turns depressed, aggravated, antsy and either drunk or high as hell. But now, during a Native American shaman circle in which everyone took turns congratulating an Occupy friend about to become a father, Stevens burst out crying. And at 8:00 the next night, when Azir pulled up in a van to pick him up with Wright and Hayne, Stevens hung back. The others were already in-

side: Baxter and one last-minute member, 23-year-old Josh Stafford, a stoned street rat and devoted Juggalo who told a friend he was schizophrenic.

Stevens looked haggard, his normally trim beard and hair grown out grizzly wild. He said he wasn't coming. He asked Azir whether his decision to bail would affect his construction job; early in his employment, Azir had told Stevens that if he wasn't "good" with the plan, he didn't want Stevens around. Azir now replied that the van still had space for one more, but that tonight's plan and the job were separate issues. It was all up to Stevens.

Wright rolled down a window. "There's still space if you want to join."

Stevens looked at his friends in the van. He got in.

SOMEWHERE THEY WERE AT Applebee's, wet and bedraggled as they took their seats around the table. The operation had gone smoothly: Wright, Stevens and Stafford had planted the bombs under the bridge while Baxter, Hayne and Azir had acted as lookouts. Although it had taken mere minutes, the tension and the rain had made it feel like forever, and the mood in the van afterward had been one of adrenaline-charged bonhomie. "If you do this stuff together, you're basically family," Wright had said, adding, "I'm glad you came, Connor." Stevens had agreed he was glad, too.

In the cheery restaurant, Wright scanned for cameras; Azir had suggested going to a place with surveillance video, to establish their alibi. As another red herring, the guys volunteered to their waiter that they were a touring rock band en route to a gig in Lakewood. As soon as the waiter left the table, Wright and Stafford each hunched over a detonator phone.

Wright tried punching in the code first. Back in the van he had joked, "I guess if we call and the FBI picks up, we know it didn't work." Then he added, "Something like that happens, I'm just going to swallow a razor blade." But now, when Wright dialed the number he'd been given, a voicemail picked up. Stafford tried too: voicemail. Each tried calling again, then texting; they tried entering multiple codes.

Stevens snickered. "What kind of group did I get involved in?" he asked.

"This is serious," Wright said. "We need to figure it out." They called the arms dealer to ask whether they had the correct code. Then Wright and Stafford tried sending the codes at the same time. For more than 10 minutes, they tried unsuccessfully to detonate the bombs. Then they all got up and left the restaurant. The FBI was waiting in the parking lot.

THE PUBLIC WAS NEVER in danger from the explosive devices," read the U.S. Attorney's Office statement to the media the next morning, announcing the arrests. "The defendants were closely monitored by law enforcement." All five were charged with conspiracy and attempting to use weapons of mass destruction. The trial is scheduled to begin on September 17th – if convicted, the boys could get life in prison: Hayne has already cut a deal, pleading

"THEY COULDN'T BLOW THEIR NOSES," CLAIMS ONE OF THE BOYS' DEFENSE ATTORNEYS, "LET ALONE BLOW UP A BRIDGE, WERE IT NOT FOR WHAT THIS PROVOCATEUR DID."

guilty and agreeing to testify in exchange for a sentence of up to 19 years.

It's difficult to characterize five young men who may have been willing to detonate a bridge – killing an untold number of people in the process – as innocent. The pivotal question is not how sincere they were, but whether they could ever have managed to put together and act on such a plan on their own, without the pressure, funding and resources provided by Shaquille Azir. Consensus among friends and family is unanimous. "I hate talking about them like this, but they weren't smart enough for something like this," says Strehle, Baxter's girlfriend, echoing the prevailing opinion. "They were clueless."

The crux of the Cleveland Five's defense will likely rest on whether Azir's aggressive role in the crime constituted entrapment – a strategy which Baxter's defense attorney John Pyle foreshadowed at an early court appearance. "They couldn't blow their noses, let alone blow up a bridge," he said of his clients, "were it not for what this provocateur did." Yet the government has had no problem overcoming the entrapment defense to win convictions in similar cases. The legal definition of entrapment is actually rather narrow: Even though enticing people into committing crimes might seem unjust, that doesn't make it unlawful. Prosecutors typically argue that defendants' histories show they

were predisposed to commit the crime. And juries frightened by the magnitude of the foiled plots are inclined to bring down the hammer.

In the case of the Cleveland Five, defense attorneys have also signaled their intention to reveal Azir's extensive criminal history, which could undermine his credibility. Azir has been causing prosecutors plenty of headaches since the arrests. After his identity was outed by the Smoking Gun, the FBI scuttled him into the witness-protection program, reportedly in response to a threat. But living life under federal protection hasn't kept him out of trouble. In May, Azir – who still faces two outstanding bad-check cases he picked up during his time with Occupy – was arrested in Cuyahoga County for theft. He's out on \$5,000 bail.

Meanwhile, the Cleveland Five, denied bail, have remained in prison since their arrests. (All declined comment for this article.) Each is adjusting to prison in his own way. Baxter has been stalwartly upbeat, saying that what he's read so far of the FBI transcripts of Azir's recordings are "not bad." Wright, by contrast, is lashing out, having been put into solitary confinement for breaking minor prison rules, including "hoarding Personal Hygiene." "I didn't know you could have too much soap... WTF?!" he wrote to a friend, signing off, "Freedom or Death, Down with the Fascist Pigs." He recently declared a hunger strike in protest of his treatment.

But it is Connor Stevens who has blossomed behind bars, writing zealous, rambling diatribes from jail, warming to his new role of political prisoner. "More and more of the truth will come out during the trial. What's done in the dark will be brought to the light," he wrote in one letter. "They can stone me to death tomorrow and I will die with dignity on the righteous side of the People." Stevens has been bowled over by the letters of solidarity pouring in from friends and strangers, and is relishing the embrace of the anarchist brotherhood. He often gets swept away by his own rapturous outrage. "The Fascists have not merely imprisoned the May Day 5," he wrote. "They have, in effect, declared war on any life which even QUESTIONS their hegemony." It's as though Stevens, in his rhetorical fervor, forgot the part where he tried to blow up a bridge.

From the loving yet angry kid with half-baked political ideals, Connor Stevens has morphed into someone who sounds like the fiery radical the government has painted him to be. Perhaps in the end, after all their efforts, the feds really did get the terrorist they wanted. But Stevens got something, too. With his legit cred as a political dissident, he has finally found a life-defining mission and, at last, a sense of belonging and identity – the fulfillment he was searching for all along.