The Uprising

Julian Sorel*

*Iowa State College

Copyright ©1963 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
The Uprising

Julian Sorel

Abstract

On a late Friday afternoon of spring, the door of Johnson Hall opened, and Michael Armstrong stepped out into the autumnal brilliance...
ON A LATE Friday afternoon of spring, the door of Johnson Hall opened, and Michael Armstrong stepped out into the autumnal brilliance. The gray stone of the massive building was a monument to higher education, imposing its austere silence on the surrounding campus. From the doors of the building belched forth the hordes of students. They were little concerned with education now, released from their classes and spreading out in every direction. Some walked slowly, ambling toward the library and the center of campus to join their comrades, spinning expectantly in the vertigo of the weekend pleasures to come. Others, their mouths watering at the thought of the beer soon to be swilled, searched out their mates for the day and hastened to the thrill of promised TGIF's, the words “Thank God It’s Friday” on their lips. And the left-over few just wandered nowhere, looking for somewhere and someone with whom they could disperse their celibate loneliness in the fertile spring. The class day was over, and Michael, turning right at the bottom of the much-trod steps, began his walk home-ward.

Michael Armstrong had come out of the dusty flats of Nebraska to pursue his education, going east towards the intellectual nucleus, east as far as the University of Illinois. He
had arisen from the small town of his birth, he had been awed by the impersonal might of this huge educational complex, but he had accustomed himself to his expanded environment; and now he fit in. Well, not exactly fit in, but he now knew what to expect here and how he was supposed to conduct himself.

He seemed to be not much different from the other students. Perhaps he was a little poorer than most and had come from a less cultured locale, but this was not too noticeable. His six foot frame was held snugly inside his campus garb. Khaki wash pants, secured by a thin black belt, rose from his tennis shoes stuffed with yellowed sweat socks. His shirt, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows, was a fairly new blue check with a button-down collar. A pack of Lucky Strikes jutted out of the pocket.

"Hey, Mike!"

Michael searched for the owner of the voice.  
"Hey!" It was David James. He was the freshman who had a room down the hall from Michael. David was like a small puppy on the end of a leash. Michael held this leash, and, try as he might, he couldn't get rid of it.

"Oh, my God!" Michael muttered under his breath and reluctantly stepped forward to meet David. "Hi there. What's up?"

"Hi, Mike. Nothing much. Just wanted to see if you were going to the library."

"Sorry, man, I can't. Got to get back to my room. I'm really beat."

"Oh . . . Well, I'll see ya later then."

"Yeh, sure. Maybe next time."

"See ya."

"Yeh, bye." Michael turned and walked away. Thank God I got rid of him, he thought. He's really a leech.

Michael fell into step with the two girls walking in front of him. He was not a bad looking boy. His brown hair was crew-cut and was long enough to curl slightly behind his ears . . . it needed cutting, but not too much. His features were plain and sharply cut, receding into the dark hollows that held his mocking gray eyes. He was inconspicuous in the crowd, and now he walked amidst the other students who moved singly and in small groups towards their residences.

"Hey!" A small hand gripped his arm.
Michael turned to look at the girl beside him. "Oh, hi, Luce. How are you?" He smiled his welcome.

"Okay. Where are you going?" Lucy bounced along beside him, radiating her pleasure at seeing him, with her dark eyes and the idiot grin that was fixed on her face. She hadn’t seen him for two days, and her ample body nestled against his side. Michael imagined that she jiggled a bit, both in front and in behind. ... in fact, he knew that she did. It was all right; he liked it that way — ungirdled and all. . .

"I’m just going back to my room. Want to come?" His face broke into a large beam.

"Oh, Michael, I can’t. I’ve got to go right back to the dorm. I’ve got to work in the kitchen this meal." Her expression became serious — regretful. "Oh, damn this working! Damn the kitchen! But . . . well, maybe I could come with you anyway." Her childish grin reappeared, and she seemed to glow with wickedness.

"Nope. You’ve got to work. If you don’t go you’ll get fired, and you’ve missed twice already. Who’ll buy me cigarettes then?" At this point Michael took out the pack of cigarettes and made a grand gesture to her, offering her a cigarette. She shook her head no, and they both broke into huge grins of amusement. But Michael put a cigarette between his smile, and then he cupped his hands against the light breeze so that he could light it. "Say . . . you coming over to see me tonight?" He took a deep draw on the cigarette and looked down at her.

"I don’t know. I really don’t think I can."

"Why not?"

"Well. . . I said I’d go out with John tonight."

"That fraternity idiot again? I thought you said you just had to go out with him on Saturday nights?"

"Well, he called me up last night, and I just couldn’t think of anything to say. And he did say there’d be a big party tonight."

"My God, I don’t see how you can stand that creep. And why the hell did you have to go and get lavaliered to him? You really must be crazy! Jesus Christ, you messed up my whole evening!"

"He’s not too bad." Her voice assumed the lyric melody of a wood nymph. "I kinda like him. He’s really not that stupid, and it’s kinda different for me to go out with him."
Besides he takes me to all those fraternity parties. He buys rum for me too. Yummy!"

"Oh, my God," he intoned in whimsical exasperation, "what can one do against these capitalistic dogs?"

Smiling, they walked on, bouncing against each other, engaged in small talk about their classes, and looking into the windows of the campus business district. Turning down a small side street, they soon arrived at the cheap brick apartment house where Michael rented his room. Here they stopped and looked at each other, searching for the words of parting.

"You sure you're not coming tonight?" He spoke softly, attempting to sway her simply by the tone of his voice.

"Well, maybe ... if I can get done early with him." Transfixed, she caught Michael's gaze and returned it.

"Okay. See you then. Bye!" The subject was finished, and he turned and strode into the house.

"Bye!" Lucy watched him walk up the three steps to the house, open the door, and walk in, shutting the door behind as he vanished into the dark interior. She looked at the door for a minute, and then resumed her walk back to the dorm and to work.

Inside the house, Michael wearily climbed the stairs to his second floor room. He had studied until 3 a.m. the night before for his Faulkner test, and today he had had six hours of classes. He was tired. He turned left at the landing and pushed open the unlocked door to the first room. Walking in, he tossed his armload of books onto his desk, and, with a sigh of relief, loosened his belt and took off his shirt. He switched on the radio to a quiet Chicago station, and then lay, stretched full length, down on his bed. The room around him was small and very narrow. It held a cheap board-hardened bed covered with blue sheets and a gray navy blanket, a flimsy desk with a matching chair of modern design, one vinyl-covered easy chair that lacked arms and appeared to be decidedly uncomfortable, and a ramshackle bookcase overflowing with Sarte, Camus, Nietzsche, Kafka, Dosteoevsky, a few enjoyable classics such as the Decameron and Rabelais, some moderns, Henry Miller, Kerouac, Ginsberg, and many cheap paperbacks of varying degrees of literary trash. The walls, cracked and holed by previous occupants, were a dark blue that almost matched the sheets of the bed. A guitar
rested in the far corner, and over it hung a small print from
Picasso's blue period: "The Guitarist." A deep green rug,
stained by ink and holding much dust, lay on the floor. Dust
balls hid under the bed and in secret corners. Hanging over
the bed was the most beautiful and striking object in the
room: a huge framed print of Daumier's "The Uprising." It
was magnificently violent in its dark shades of brown . . .
a boy stood, with hand raised and mouth open, his eyes burn­
ing flames, over a mob, leading it on. But Michael could no
longer see him, this passionate boy, for Michael was now
asleep. . .

The sharp rapping on the door resounded hollowly
through the room. His eyes forced themselves open and
stared at the ceiling. "Oh, God," he muttered under his
breath, "what is it now? Yeh, come in!" He sat up, crossing
his legs, and leaned back against the wall.

"It's me . . . Dave," a voice said.

"Yeh, yeh, come on in!"

The door opened, and David James walked in. He was
the freshman who lived down the hall. His tall, thin body
slumped into the desk chair. A few loose strands of his black
hair drifted down over his forehead, and he held a lighted
cigarette in his hand. As he took a drag on the cigarette, his
eyes renewed themselves with the familiar room. Finally
coming to rest on Michael, he asked, "How are you?"

"Great, just great. What's new?" A touch of sarcasm
slipped into Michael's voice.

"Nothing much. Just came down to shoot the bull."

"How's your girl?" Michael asked.

"Ah, she's the same. You know how it is. Now she's mad­
der than hell at me 'cause I told her that I didn't want to go
to the spring dance. Christ, it's always something! It's al­
ways, 'You don't love me enough!' And she keeps playing
hard to get all the time. God, I just can't seem to do anything
right. I just can't win. God knows I love her too."

"Jesus, man, you just don't have the right attitude. The
best thing you could do would be to get rid of that chick —
she's dismal. Man, you can't let them run you like that! It's
hopeless!"

"Yeh, I know. But I can't help it. I'm really stuck on this
chick. Ya know, I've actually been thinking about marrying
her!"
“Oh, my God! Look, I know that chicks are great and all that rot, but they have their purpose. Relieve inner tensions and the like. Really an enjoyable way of relief, too. But, man, you've just got to treat them right. Make 'em eat out of your hand. Here, now look . . . look at Luce and me. It's a great little relationship. Christ, she even buys me my cigarettes, and she's over here every weekend just to keep me happy!"

“Yeh, it does sound great. But I just couldn't do it. I'm too damned weak!"

“You're out of your mind, man. Listen, I'll admit that Luce is a bit crazy, but what the hell. I think she's kinda funny. She's good too. Say did you know that she actually went and got lavaliered to this big, dumb fraternity jock. He goes out with her and she's Miss Prim-and-Proper—really cold. And then she comes over here all the time. Hell, she tells me about her dates with him. Poor bastard. Really do like Luce, though. Hell of a lot of fun to be with. . . just like a little kid.”

“Yeh, she's a good girl.”

“Yeh, she's really a funny kid. You know, she won't go out with any Jewish boys. Says she doesn't like them. It's funnier than hell; her parents sent her all the way from New York to find her a nice kosher husband. Man, they'd really drop their drawers if they knew that she was going out with goyim like me. Kinda glad she's around though. Kinda gotten used to the kid.”

“God, Mike, I wish I could get a girl like Lucy, but I just can't handle them. I get so damned involved. Then they just twist me 'round their fingers. Damn love!”

“Yeh, love's hell. It might be a good thing if you could really get it, but you can't. It's all so damn phony and affected. So, you gotta treat a woman mean — let them know who's boss — be superior. Can't let them have their way all the time. It's great. . . but . . . well, you gotta be nice to them once in a while. Then they think that you're really stuck on them. Then they just fall all over you when you're good to them.”

“Yeh, that's right, Mike. I just wish I could do it like you. The trouble is that I always get so damned involved. . . . can't do anything. Wish I knew what to do . . . Hey, Mike what time is it?”
Michael glanced at his watch and replied, “Twenty to six.”

“Oh, God, Mike, I’ve gotta go! Got to go and dish out the hash to all the bitches in the dorms . . . God bless their ugly little faces. See ya later, okay?”

“Yeh, sure, sure. Say hello to Luce for me, will ya!”

The door slammed shut as David hurried out. The house was now silent. Michael eased himself back to the lumpy comfort of the mattress and blissfully shut his eyes. Dusk had just begun to enfold the room. Turning it into a soft world of shadows. He lay on the bed and thought of Lucy. I can just see her working in that kitchen. She’d look funnier than hell. God, would I like to see her now. Hope she comes tonight. The vision became sharper as he thought of her, how she moved, the beauty of every part of her body, of the last time she was in the room with him, of how she moaned when he touched her . . . The vision grew dimmer . . . he was asleep.

Later.

Later, Michael awoke from his sleep and looked at his watch. Alone in his room, he spoke to himself . . . just to keep himself company, he would say, “Oh, my God, its 7:30. Shit! All right, my dear Mr. Armstrong, if you want to see that Bergman film, you’re going to have to tear-ass. You’re not going to sit around here all night just waiting for Lucy, are you? She probably won’t come anyway. So, come on, boy. You’ve got to shave and put on a white shirt. Okay? Okay.” Michael smiled to himself. He walked to the tiny bathroom that was stuck in the wall between his desk and the bookcase. He flicked on the light and stood peering at himself in the cracked mirror. His expression was cold, but the look on the face that stared back at him was twice as cold.

The face in the mirror vanished as he bent over the sink and splashed warm water on his face. Dripping, he reached for the mug of soap and his shaving brush. Wonder if I have any new razor blades, he thought.

Whamm! The door opened violently and crashed into the wall.

“Michael!” It was Lucy.

“Yeh, in here.”

“You promised!”
“Huh? . . . you’re a little early, aren’t ya?” He looked through the open door into his room. She was just standing there.

“You promised, Michael.”

He dropped the brush and soap mug. It wasn’t like her to stand out there, alone, staring at him. He walked into the room, wiping his hands on his pants legs.

“What? Promised what?” She really looked upset. Her eyes were misty and kept blinking . . . the eye-shadow had run. Her lower lip trembled.

“You promised . . . said you’d never say anything . . . Oh, Damn you! Damn you, Michael!” Her lips shook, and she tried to bite them shut. Tears began to roll down her cheeks.

“Hey, Luce, what’s the matter? Promise? I said what? What’s the matter?” He tried to put his arms around her. She pushed him away.

“Don’t! Don’t touch me! You promised! Said you’d never tell . . . anyone . . . never! How many did you tell? How many? Oh, I hate you!” Her voice was shrill and cracked. She began to cry and pound on his chest, his arms, striking out at him.

“Luce, you’re hysterical! Stop crying! Damn that Dave. stop it! What’d I say? Come . . .”

“Damn you! I HATE YOU! I HATE YOU! I HATE YOU!” She hit out at him, trying to hurt him, hitting with all her might.

“Luce, you’re hysterical! Stop crying! Damn that Dave. Damn it, Luce, I said STOP!”

“I HATE YOU! YOU PROMISED! I HATE YOU!”

He tried to grab her shoulders. Shake her. Make her stop! She kicked him hard — hard on the leg.

“You dumb bitch, Lucy! Stop! Stop or I’ll HIT YOU!”

“I HATE YOU! YOU PROMISED!” The blows rained down upon him. Feet. Fists. With all her might she hit him. She struck and the tears flowed down her face.

“Damn it, Lucy, STOP! I’M GONNA CLOBBER YOU, LUCE! STOP!”

“YOU LIAR! YOU PROMISED! I HATE YOU!!” She threw the blows and tears on him. Hard. Hard. Harder.

“Okay, Luce!” The back of his left hand struck out, catching her below the left eye. The blow knocked her reel-
ing, backwards onto the bed. Her hands clutched the spot where he struck her. Her mouth was open—voiceless. Her eyes stared in terror at him. He could see his white finger marks slowly turn red on her face. She looked as if she wanted to scream, but lacked the strength.

“I warned ya, Luce! Why didn’t you stop?” Michael spoke numbly—still shocked at his own action.

She said nothing. Her eyes were wide open . . . then they narrowed, staring at him. She stood up and faced him squarely. He tried to avoid her eyes. They were ruthless and cold. They drew him toward her with their shining-hard surfaces. He could not look away.

“I hate you.” Her voice was low and dispassionate. She stared intently at him, and then, turning away, she walked out of the room.

“Luce . . . Lucy!” She was gone.

Michael looked around his room . . . not understanding . . . not understanding anything at all. He looked at Daumier’s painting of the passionate boy. He spoke to it, “But I was right. She made me do it! I did what I had to! Damn it, I had to! IT WAS RIGHT!”

And it was, and it wasn’t.