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Baby Bird & the Electronic Abyss

Alexis Senior
University of Central Florida

BABY BIRD & THE ELECTRONIC ABYSS

by

ALEXIS SENIOR
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ABSTRACT

What is a real life? A well-lived life? And how do we define either?

Baby Bird & the Electronic Abyss is a collection of personal essays that questions and explores escapism and existentialism as experienced at music festivals and campsites around the United States. Within this collection, festivals are illustrated as more than just spectacular stages and bright lights—they're depicted as fascinating, budding utopias that encourage creativity, generosity, and positivity from attendees who abandon inhibitions, and oftentimes logic, in the name of fleeting freedom from the routine of their "real" lives.

The narrator strives to live a fulfilled life—what many *might* call a well-lived life, if not a privileged life—but she struggles to identify her life as meaningful as she works to disentangle the falsities of her "real" life as typically defined by society, a corporate, desk life in between festivals, and her electric life, an actualized but less publicly-accepted life at festivals. She repeatedly contemplates her relationship with art, and whether or not art offers a sort of immortality to those who pursue it. As a festival-goer, she finds that the art of music takes her away from her own art, writing, but her writing is about the festivals, so a love/hate relationship grows with the festivals over time.

Many of these essays, such as "In a Tent, a Home," "Rebecca," "We Left Town," and "I Don't Wanna Wear No Shoes," ruminate on how dislocation and travel can be fulfilling occasions for further ontological inquiry. Other essays, including "They Call Me Baby Bird," "Monterey, Babe," and "When the Fire Dancers Come Alive at Night," focus on music and entertainment, and a kind of resulting debauchery that compels the narrator to reflect on her moral incontinence, inability to identify reality, and jaded self-appraisal.

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And, of course, thanks, UCF. What a long, strange trip it's been.

For anyone trying to figure out how to live this life:
"Into the forest we go, to lose our minds and find our souls." *Unknown*

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PREFACE

Established writers have laughed and said, “What do you know about life at twenty-seven years old? You don’t have a book in you yet.”

I agree, but at twenty-seven I know I have experienced happiness, hurt, elation, depression, ignorance, bliss, all-consuming existential funk, and other emotions I don’t have words for, both good and bad. I know that life is both exploding with meaning and incredibly meaningless, and I know that I’m struggling to decide which one I want to embrace. A lot of my writing focuses on this. What is the point of all of the things I do to make myself happy? And is happiness actually lasting? Or am I constantly just searching for outlets that will distract me from my routine life and defining those outlets as happiness, when that type of escapist happiness is actually very fleeting and needs to be refilled?

It’s like getting high. You need just a little more each time to feel as good as you felt the first time. And if I’m constantly trying to distract myself from my normal, human life, specifically my working life, that very celebrated and also deeply despised and questioned American nine-to-five life, are those outlets of distraction more my real life than my routine life? How do we define a real life? How do we define a good life? A happy life?

I think about this often: vacation. The purpose: To leave “real life” for a moment, to relax and sleep well, to wake up unrushed and maybe even do something out of the ordinary, to be the tourist, the stranger in town. The universal idea of vacation suggests that what I do on a daily basis can become monotonous, or un-fun, so much so that I need to be given an extended break to act and function as someone else.

And it's true. I have always found doing the same thing every day disillusioning. I jumped from job to job in college, a bartender, a proofreader, a spray tan artist, a pet shelter volunteer. No two paths were like the other. My mother has always said I "need variety like fish need water," more an accusation than a compliment. I've been called flighty before, by her and by others. Every so often, I need to escape. And whenever I want to, I do.

That's why the setting in my writing is almost always a music festival. I went to my first in 2010. It was Bonnaroo Music and Arts festival, in Manchester, Tennessee. There were over 80,000 people in attendance, and I camped for four days in the middle of a giant field with people who were mostly strangers. I had never been to a festival, let alone festival camping. But when I realized what it was, I fell completely in love with the concept, more even than I have with any human.

At these festivals, I can be whoever I want. No one judges anyone else, not their clothes, not their hair, not their accent, not their taste in music, not their level of intelligence, not their jokes, not their background. High fives are constantly offered as you walk down the roads and through the thick throngs of people. Sharing is expected, whether it is food or clothes or shelter or even drugs. Emotional walls come down. It's so easy to talk to people in this setting, and easier to listen. Everyone is from somewhere else. Conversations side-by-side with strangers walking down dirt boulevards in mismatching clothing, covered in glitter, and giddy with happiness, they create another escape. Loving the same music as someone else, it creates a bond.

Anyway, Bonnaroo changed my life immeasurably. When I got back home to Orlando, I needed a full week to recover. I was sick with what is called "post-festival depression," a mix of a depletion of serotonin paired with the reality shock of having to assimilate back into work and

school after spending a week barefoot, practically unclothed, and living off of very little—but I made plans as soon as I got back home to Orlando to attend again the following year.

I started going to festivals more frequently after my second Bonnaroo in 2011. Getting deeper into the scene also meant finding out about other festivals around the country, seeing the colorful cloth wristbands on the arms of neighbors who told me stories of places that "could not be missed." Since then, I've been to an average of five festivals a year. Besides the grueling fourteen-hour drive to Tennessee that I've now put myself through four times for Roo, I've flown to Washington state, California, Colorado, Texas, Georgia, Baltimore, and New York for festivals. I went to the most I've ever been to, eight in one year, in 2015. I classified this type of travel as an addiction at that point, leaving nearly every month to seek out the enormous stages and laser lights and ever-growing crowds that I like to lose myself in.

And that is when I think I started to get jaded. I overdid it. The madness, the mayhem, the substances. Nothing felt as bright or as good. I started to obsess over why I was going so often. Did I even love music as much as I thought I did? Or did I just love getting really high?

I didn't commit to writing about my experiences until 2015, when I discovered that I was an escapist. Of course I loved music. Of course I still do. I appreciate all genres, though I listen to electronic the most, as do many millennials. But after seeing close to 200 sets in one year, both at festivals and in the city I live in, I started to wonder if there were other ways to feel happy.

A running joke amongst my friends when we get back from festivals is how we "need a vacation from our vacation." There's little sleep or relaxation to be had at festivals. My life flooded with complications after I started to question the way I was living and the things I was

doing to my body. I realized my living situation was perpetrating the partying: a house I shared with my boyfriend, and his two best friends. I realized I wanted to party less. I realized I wasn't as happy as I thought with my boyfriend of five years. I realized I was supposed to graduate in spring of '16 with a Masters in Fine Art, but didn't have shit to show for it.

I moved out, we broke up, and I made myself start attempting some honest writing. For a while, I resisted writing about festivals because the content can be so explicit and so illegal, and I feared if I ever got published it would change the course of my professional writing career, making me unhireable. But now, I see this work as a catharsis. What I've gained from it is clarity, that maybe I'm one of many people who feel totally lost in this life, and from that clarity I've gained a broader acceptance of myself. I realize to be lost is not necessarily to be lost forever. And in losing myself in this work, I've learned the value of the craft of writing flash nonfiction, the power of brief scenes, the little moments that make up this big, beautiful life I'm trying to make less of a mess of now.

Really, this collection is still in its infancy, because my understanding of myself is in its infancy. I don't really know if either is any good at all. But I know things are interesting, and that has to count for something.

BABY BIRD GOES TO HER FIRST MUSIC FESTIVAL

One day, they'll call us neo-hippies: young ones who wandered and squandered and never ate enough in the sun, surviving on the idea of sound as soul, and a fad festival diet of flax seed, granola, and forged freedom. They'll say we were silly, that we had little perspective, that we were a lost generation, that we ruined a nation, with our mockery of what it is to be adult, fully-functioning, responsible, growing up, giving in to all the things they asked of us but we had no answers for.

Today, we live in swamps, cornfields, and deserts, shirtless and shameless and sometimes sleeping on soft blades of grass or swimming in blue lakes before festival stages call to us from afar with banjos and guitars, and we'll run to them, away from the labels and into the arms of ourselves. We wait, never patiently, for night to fall, for drilling drum patterns to cause undulating eyeballs, for moonrise and sunrise to bear no differences as we lean into the sky. Confident-footed in muddy boots with heavy heels, we wave rage sticks studded with photos of our fathers as we dance to gripping guitar riffs and grab ass in swaying crowds of sparkling girls, twenty-somethings, singing and sappy under the influence of warm whiskey and God-knows-what-else. Digital interaction doesn't exist here as these bodies mingle physical in this wild wasteland of arms and legs and bobbing heads. We touch and we touch and we touch. Finally, we touch.

We're off Facebook, now. We're off Twitter, now. We're desperate to feel, we're desperate to be felt, but a little less desperate to be heard as we drown in sound and beats and bass and laser beams. We're singing together, now, and later we'll whisper to one another as we tuck ourselves into sleeping bags full of gray dust and black ants how youth is not wasted on the

young here, in these green valleys and brown tundras where big-lit stages are set up to be taken down—it is found.

THEY CALL ME BABY BIRD

They call me Baby Bird because after a day or two at the farm, better known to the public as Bonnaroo Music and Arts Festival in Manchester, Tennessee, I won't eat.

It's not because I don't want to—I do, I'm just too hot and hungover to force anything nourishing down my throat after three nights of no sleep, plus countless shots of brown, sugary whiskey and appetite suppressants like cigarettes running through my system.

"Baby Bird," my five friends all say throughout the day as they hold water bottles and slices of greasy festival pizza out to me, "Baby Bird, please eat."

I think of my friends as mama birds, their bodies feathered with dead leaves and leafy green weeds as they lift themselves from sitting in the grass to go hunt my food down from overpriced vendors and mush it around on oily paper plates before they try to feed it to me with their claw-like hands.

"Want me to chew for you, too?" says Kim. Her blonde hair is a yellow halo under the sun. She looks ethereal in the white light of a cumulus-clouded sky as she stands over me. I purse my lips, a refusal. My stomach feels cavernous, but it doesn't bother me. If I eat too much, I won't feel the full effect of the psychedelic fungi that I will eat later.

"Baby bird."

My friends are getting agitated as they gather around me. The sun started shining too high and too hot for us to ignore it around 8 a.m., and we dutifully woke to enjoy another day of false reality at a campsite that we built as if we'd planned to stay forever, with big tents and comfy air mattresses and easy to eat junk foods and large flashlights and industrial army tarps and even a coffee table. This is my third year at Bonnaroo, where we pretend that we'll never have to leave,

that we'll never need much money or any of the possessions we've left back home or dinners at decent restaurants or jobs to keep us afloat to be happy the way we are right now. But my sluggishness from not eating is slowing down the group and keeping them from the day full of music we came here for. It's time to get up.

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I guess I fell asleep just before dawn where they found me, under the blue cloth tailgate chair just outside the entrance of my tent. I often wake up in strange places at camp. If I'm lucky, I wake up in my tent. But sometimes I wake up on my yoga mat under the red canopy that comes everywhere with us. Sometimes I wake up in the grass. Sometimes in someone's car. It all depends on how well I feel I can predict the weather when we stagger back at four or five in the morning. Not that I can think much at that point, but I can smell rain coming. I know when the bugs are quiet, it's going to be cold, and when it's dry, I know it will be hot. When it's windy and the sky gets smooth and gray in the late afternoon, there's always a chance of a dust storm. But gray clouds don't bother us because they don't always mean rain, but they do mean shade. Shade is a luxury in the fields. There are few trees, and when there are, people sit in the shade the leaves create to the very edge of their shadow. It's not uncommon to get sunburned on only one side of your body after trying to squeeze in at the border, where dark meets light, where our legs and feet flatten the grass beneath us and we make small self-sized nests to rest in.

A woman working in a succulent nursery once told me that when grass gets mowed, the purpose of the natural, herbaceous smell the blades emit is to let other plants know that they're under attack. I always think about this when we trudge back to camp when the sky turns a pale

red and the smell of trampled reeds and weeds send up the scent of summer, an air freshener to us, a slow death for them.

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I shut my eyes and ignore my friends when they nag me to eat. The smell of the pizza makes me feel sick. I don't desire it at all, not after the night that I ate mushrooms on a top of a personal pepperoni pie during Paul McCartney at Bonnaroo's main stage, the What Stage.

The Bonnaroo farm is the size of 375 football fields, and the What Stage could be an arena all to itself. The What field is lined with vendors selling everything from pizza to vegan fare to gouda macaroni and cheese to falafel to alcohol to fresh-squeezed lemonade to tapestries to jewelry to hoodies to crystals to hippie-happy paintings and prints. It can hold up to 100,000 fans. To get front row for your favorite artist, you have to head over and stake your spot hours before the show starts. If you come an hour early, you'll get a spot somewhere in the middle, maybe fifty yards away. If you come on time, you're likely spreading out a blanket on the ground in the back and lounging while you listen to the sounds of guitar and percussion echo their way out to you.

And what a mind game this is: Bonnaroo stages are named the What Stage, Which Stage, This Tent, That Tent, and Other Tent. The 700-acre space, at this time in 2013, hosted 189 acts, including headliners Sir Paul, Mumford & Sons, Bjork, Tom Petty, Wu Tang Clan, The National, Kendrick Lamar, and Wilco. Sometimes we saw these sets together, and sometimes we saw them separately, and sometimes we saw them completely alone because sometimes it's impossible to figure out where anyone is because of the absurd stage names.

I've been part of many Bonnaroo walky-talky conversations like this one:

"Hey, where are you?"

"What?"

"Where are you?"

"No, I'm saying I'm at What Stage."

"You don't know what stage you're at?"

"No, I'm LITERALLY SAYING I'M AT FUCKING WHAT STAGE."

"Oh, ok. We're at This Tent."

"Which one?"

"No, not Which! This."

"Roger that."

"No, god, not That, This."

"I know, ok, fine, roger This."

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We were excited about the entire 2013 lineup, but for me, it was most important to see Paul McCartney. Throughout my childhood, my parents, who were born in the '50s, played The Beatles religiously. At family dinners and birthday parties, on pool days and beach days, when they were in good moods or bad moods, one of them would throw on The Beatles. Sometimes, if he was good and drunk, my father sang and danced, voice singing off key and feet shuffling off beat.

"Turn it down," my mother called to him as she scrubbed dishes and he poured himself another.

"Made loud to be played loud," he always yelled back, tapping his heels together and twirling me as I tried to run past him to escape to my yellow bedroom covered in black and white posters of Jimi Hendrix, Stevie Nicks, and Freddy Mercury. I was, and am, a product of my dad's taste in music. I had to see Paul, for his love of The Beatles, for my own, and for general bragging rights.

But when Sir Paul played "Blackbird," a couple beside me sunk into the grass and starting fucking right there at my feet. I was tripping on exactly an eighth of psychedelic hydroponic mushrooms that I ate on top of a slice of what they call Spicy Pie, $7 a slice, and oily as an Italian cooking pan. It looked like the two were eating each other. I told myself to ignore them. I had already had a good mushroom cry before we got to the What Stage, a mild hysteria bubbling up from my throat, my laughter unnatural, and my eyes raining into my hands. I licked my own tears off my fingers to taste the salt, the chloride, to remind myself that I was alive and functioning and I was not in fact an ocean trapped in a body, which led to a horror novel idea of an ocean being trapped in a body, could you imagine, which led to another horror novel idea of a body being trapped inside a body, my god, and then realizing that this horror movie idea was actually just mine and everyone else's lives.

The cry threw me off. My whole life I've let a moment of sadness shadow a joyous moment because I know that the moment and that joy will eventually end, as all things do. It's why we stay up until sunrise. It's why we try to stay awake and stare into the eyes of our lovers. It's why we say, "Just one more," when we're out drinking, or, "No, you hang up," when we don't want to get off the phone. Why we try to remember to water our flowers. Why we save the best bite for last. We never want good things to end.

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The sex that the couple was having was not beautiful, but I couldn't stop watching. It was awkward and janky. From my own experience with sex, I couldn't imagine her enjoying it all that much, knees pushing up and down and digging into the earth next to his hips.

"Good grief," I said to no one when the woman on top lifted her face to the sky to moan like a cat in heat.

They didn't take off their clothing. He unzipped his pants and pulled them down around his waist so she could simply sit on him with her dress riding up her thighs. Their faces molded into one as I looked from them, to the stage, to them, to Sir Paul, to them. They morphed into small black clouds with Salvador Dali faces, dripping and long, in the dirt as they moved against each other. The dust reached my nose. I imagined their germs creeping into my pores. I covered my mouth with a bandana and tried to slip behind the friend who stood beside me to escape the sex dust storm.

Moving in a crowd at a festival isn't easy. If you're far enough up, you've either been waiting for hours for a set to start, or you forced your way through elbows and shoulders and settled in front of people who are likely annoyed with you for not waiting a few hours like they did. They passive-aggressively look at the back of your head until the music starts, but when it finally does, there's a good chance you become friends. You'll sway together, sing together. You'll share your weed and your whiskey. You'll either exchange numbers after, or you'll never see them again, and that's ok.

Or there's a chance they'll just hate you, trying to block your view or complaining loudly or giving your kidney little nudges with the back of their arms. Once the music starts, that tension typically fizzles, and they'll just go back to never knowing you existed. But not always.

We had gotten there just early enough to be packed nicely into the middle. I'm notorious for pushing to the front alone—as a single person, it's more forgivable—and finding everyone just before the set ends. I like to look back when I'm at the front of a crowd. I like to see the whites of everyone's eyes peeking over heads and in between shoulders, pupils dilated, rims occasionally red with emotion, and certainly from being stoned. I like watching the colorful totems—or "friend finders," as some call them—sway and swing above me, around me, how they are cloudlike in their height and also in their differences in shape and size.

The totems are a form of festival comedy. I'll never remember them all, but I've seen just about everything. A cardboard cutout of a South Park character named Randy riding a giant scrotum; a plastic, flapping unicorn head; a mangled teddy bear with lights for eyes; a Canadian flag that slapped me in the face a time or two when the holder got to wave-happy and sent it flying back and forth above our heads; a blown up vintage picture of someone's mustached dad; a furry blob with blinking Christmas lights; a sign that said "Lost? Dance with us!"; a giant smiley face emoji; a glittering skull with a feather crown; hundreds of "RIP Harambe" or Dicks out for Harambe" or "Tits out for Harambe" signs; famous internet memes of Oprah crying, Michael Jordan crying, Kim Kardashian crying; lots of cats; giant flowers; the list goes on and on.

I couldn't move during Paul McCartney. It was too much work. I bumped against my friends, who bumped against each other, shuffling a few feet left, and a few feet right, but the

crowd was tight like skin on bones. It wasn't going anywhere. Time crawled on as Paul crooned and chattered. It felt like it took hours for the pair to finish. I saw them lick others' faces at the end when the dust stopped, like cats doing a friendly cleaning. I imagined small, triangular ears sprouted on the girl's head. When the pair clumsily untwined I clapped for them, though everyone was clapping for the encore. I was grateful the show was over.

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My friends rip off more pieces of pizza and offer them hanging from their fingertips.

"Does baby bird need smaller bites?"

They're patronizing me, eyes wide with fraudulent concern. They're tired, too. It's hot out. They don't want to babysit the baby bird anymore. Someone hands me a banana.

After Paul, I asked a friend to walk me back to camp. I was unsettled by the whole sex scenario. I imagined there was dirt in the girl's vagina. My thoughts dwelled on this, on her, on infection, as he helped me into the front seat of the suburban we had driven twelve hours and 626 miles to get there.

"It's too cold for you to sit out here alone. Stay in here with the heater on until you feel better."

I dozed and listened to people chatter and giggle as they walked past the front of the car. I have no idea how long I was in that car for, maybe three hours, and at some point I forgot the heater was on and mistook the warmth for pee. I jumped out of the car after fighting the handle for what felt like a lifetime. I was tripping my face off. My fingers were worms. My body was a chocolate bar. My phone looked like a polychromatic, the light changing in waves. It pulsated at me. The numbers danced. I couldn't figure out how to press the buttons to unlock it as colors

swirled under the screen. I rubbed my hand over the seat. No pee. Just heater. I sat in the grass and laughed like a sad woman watching TV alone, loud and with hope that someone might hear me.

"What's so funny?" asked a guy from a passing group. He wore a hat shaped like a duck, the top the eyes and the bill the beak, on his head.

"I need to go pee," I told him. I did. I was so relieved I hadn't gone in the car, but my laughter was creating a sudden urge to go.

"We'll help you," he said.

His name was Dylan. I don't remember his last name or where he was from. He and his three nameless friends took me to a porta potty, where I struggled to figure out how my zipper worked for another lifetime, my worm fingers soft and useless in the dark. I was shocked they were still waiting for me when I got out. Their bodies looked like they were very tall. I could hear my heartbeat in my head. I imagined small birds flying around my skull, like after a cartoon character gets knocked out by an anvil. I imagined wearing the birds like a halo. I touched the air around my head to see if anything was there, the weight of something pressing down on me from above. I knew there was nothing there, but I tangled my hands in my hair trying to make sense of the heaviness I was feeling.

"Come to our camp so you're not alone," he said. He didn't wait for an answer. I just followed.

When we got there, they offered me rum and whiskey straight out of the bottles. I drank both, a bird nosing in its nectar. Their black-top canopy was protected on all four sides by white sheets that were slashed with color.

"This is cool," I told them earnestly. I felt like I was sitting in a rainbow.

Dylan held out a brush to me.

"Try some," he said.

I was confused. I looked at the brush, and back at him.

"Paint," he told me.

I shook the brush in my hand and watched paint drip off.

What I remember: Laughter, light. An ache in my wrist as I shook paint onto the sheets, hard and fast. The taste of paint in my mouth. Dylan making out with a boy who looked much younger than him. More paint. Paint on me, paint on us. In our hair. Me asking if the paint will come out. More laughter. A girl kissing my neck with green paint on her lips. Lying in the grass with her and looking up at the sky, fractured with low clouds and sparse stars. Talking about something, talking about nothing. Walking, aimlessly and far. Feeling touched by these kind strangers who invited me into their lives for a little while. Finally seeing the suburban, then being unsure if it was our suburban, then simply hoping it was our suburban. Then nothing.

When I woke up in the center of my own campsite, green and grim, my friends had only one question:

"What the fuck happened to you last night?"

I laughed and held my green hands against my eyes.

"I flew away," I told them.

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I take the banana and eat it begrudgingly with my hands so they'll leave me alone, breaking off pieces of the bruised, chalky fruit and mushing it around with teeth and tongue. It

tastes as I expected—like smoke and liquor, dirt and beer. My mouth is coated with my poor decisions. My gums feel foreign and dry as the banana slides against them. Kim nods at me as I chew, my mother hen, watching me swallow every last bite.

"C'mon, baby bird," she says when I finish. "There's so much to do."

I hold out my arms for help up. A blackbird I am not today, my broken baby bird wings hanging beside my achy ribs, but I'll take these sore feet over crying grass and dance it to death if it's the last thing I do.

MONTEREY, BABE

If you ask people what music festival was the first to ever happen, most would probably tell you it was Woodstock, and that it happened in Bethel, New York in 1969. They would tell you that they've seen black and white pictures of women half-clothed and men urinating in public, of dread-headed crowds cheering and sleeping and smiling during what looks like a sunny day, and then a rainy one. They would probably tell you that Jimi Hendrix played the guitar with his teeth, and if they really know their stuff, they'd tell you that The Grateful Dead had to cut their set short because they blew their own amps playing so hard.

But the truth is the Monterey International Pop Festival in California beat Woodstock to the punch by two years, in 1967. The three-day event was planned by John Phillips of The Mamas & The Papas, who enlisted many of the same names that graced the Woodstock lineup. Jefferson Airplane, Buffalo Springfield, The Grateful Dead, The Jimi Hendrix Experience, Janis Joplin, Otis Redding, Simon & Garfunkel, and other big names in rock took the stage in front of what is said to have been almost 90,000 people, just short of Woodstock's 100,000.

I think it's fair to call Monterey the true foundation of the current festival phenomenon because it birthed Woodstock. And it's absolutely a phenomenon. With over 217 festivals happening annually in the United States alone as of summer 2016, there's nearly one for every day of the week (approximately four a week). A 2014 study reported by *Billboard* says that 32 million people attended at least one festival that year, and that music-festival goers were willing to drive 903 miles to attend a festival. One third of those people attended more than one festival, meaning 10.7 million people attended two or more festivals that year.

But I had never heard of Monterey Pop Festival until I went to Spirit Care at a Halloween festival called Hulaween, held in the lush, Spanish-moss dressed land of Suwanee, Florida. It was my first time there, in 2014.

Spirit Care is this festival's nice way of saying, "Did you get too fucked up on LSD? Come on by, and we'll talk you out of your delusions with warm lighting and lukewarm soup."

I wasn't too fucked up on LSD, yet—it was just cold, so cold, 39 degrees cold, and I had packed for the four-day camp with the expectation that the weather would be Florida's usual humid, mid-eighties most of the day. For us native Floridians, anything below fifty degrees was just too cold. Even though the walk from camp to the festival gates was under a mile, Kim and I had to stop to huddle close to the fire at the entrance of Spirit Care, which came last after the long line of vendors that led to the silver-barred entryway. A few tweakers sat on either side of us, chattering, shivering, eyes rolling every once in a while, speech slurred. I went for a spot between a sleeping guy with long, knotty hair and a dusty heap of blankets. A guy across from me in the circle of misfits was named Gustavo, and he was from Venezuela, and we could not understand a thing he said except for "ketamine." We nodded at him as he spoke, uncomfortable, but too warmed to want to leave the fire.

A paramedic stood behind us.

"Ever heard of the Summer of Love?" he asked.

I shook my head. Kim, three years my elder at twenty-eight, nodded.

"The 60s, right?" she asked.

"Yeah pretty much," said the paramedic. "1967. Thousands of hippies came together like this in San Francisco. Maybe 100,000. Maybe more. But they did it mostly for drugs I think."

“I was born in the wrong era,” said Kim.

“How is that any different from now?” I asked.

“That was the year of the first music festival,” said the paramedic.

“Woodstock?” I said.

“No,” he said. “Monterey, babe.”

Gustavo was twitching so hard that the paramedic excused himself and helped him up and inside the big medical tent behind us. We watched as he passed under the large white tent flaps, the plastic slapping Gustavo’s face as he spoke rapidly in Venezuelan and laughed like a hyena that had sucked helium out of a balloon.

“That’s a k-hole if I’ve ever seen one,” said the lump of clothing and blankets that I hadn’t realized was a person sitting next to me.

“Jesus,” I said. “I thought you were a pile of blankets.”

“I am a pile of blankets,” mumbled the pile of blankets.

I stared at the pile until Kim asked if we could go inside Spirit Care for some hot tea. The pile of blankets did not say anything else. I didn’t know much about what a k-hole might feel like, but it’s been explained to me as sinking into a black hole, as if you were to sit down and never actually feel the ground, weightless and unaffected by gravity. Ketamine is a sedative. Most people look like they’re in a trance after they snort it. Gus looked more like he was in an internal frenzy. I wondered if he had mixed it with something.

Being inside Spirit Care felt like being inside of a mouth. Soft red lights glowed pink on the white walls, making them look fleshy and bitten like our own lips and cheeks. Someone was playing a tambourine in the tented room next to us. There was a dilapidated couch and a

scratched brown coffee table that looked like it had been very loved by hands and feet, fingerprints and heel dents clear in the worn lacquer, and we sank into the couch as if we were in our own living room. We hadn't been inside any real shelter, just our small two-person and three-person tents, for three days. We giggled and stretched our arms and legs and shrugged out of our hooded Aztec-patterned cotton sweatshirts for the first time since the sun had fallen. The space heater made our noses run and faces flush in minutes.

"Anyone need mouth to mouth in here?" the paramedic asked as he slid out from under the adjoining tent flap.

"How's Gus?" I asked him. We didn't know Gustavo, but I was assuming that was his nickname.

The paramedic shrugged. "He's in a k-hole."

We nodded. The pile had been right.

"You guys can't stay here for long," said the paramedic. "We need this room for people who are actually ill."

I batted my non-existent eyelashes at him. I'd burned them off lighting a very small glass bowl too close to my face the night before.

"Ten minutes," he said.

"What else do you know about Monterey?" I asked.

"My mom went. She was a hippie I guess, a Deadhead. She followed them around for a while after she saw them at Monterey. I grew up listening to them."

"The hippie's son becomes a paramedic to save the drugged up lost souls of the world," I said. "Classic."

The paramedic shook his head and rolled up his sleeve to show us a tattoo on his left inner wrist—a green dancing bear.

"Wait," I said.

"I'm not a paramedic," he said before I could say anything else. "I'm just a volunteer. Do you guys know where I could get some mushrooms?"

These are the surprises that lurk in the shadows around us all the time. It's impossible to know what anyone's doing ever. Everyone has a façade that they choose to use or dismiss for a time. Everyone can look like whoever or whatever they choose, whether it be a pile of blankets or a paramedic or something else, better or worse. I guess what I'm saying is everyone's a liar. I know I'm a liar in my real world, working corporate jobs and wearing corporate outfits and smiling my corporate smile, too wide, too toothy, when all I really want is to fly away to these lands of big crowds and comradery. Where it's finally ok to feel and ok to question what is real.

I was lucky to get a job right out of college. I graduated in the fall of 2011. I was tenacious, and willing to work. I majored in English as an undergrad, and when people started to say, "Oh, so you're going to be a teacher?" as though that was my only option, I realized there was little promise of profit in my subject. So I picked up a minor in magazine journalism, and got an internship at a local magazine in Orlando, where I went to college. I was hired the summer of 2012. The magazine was owned by a corporation that continued to cut the staff over the course of the two years I was there until there was nearly no one left.

I jumped ship for a job in social media, where I wrote content calendars, timelines of copy to be posted across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, for various fast food chains I had never eaten at and honestly despised. I was writing to make people desire shitty cheeseburgers

and chicken wings, while I went home and ate bowls of quinoa and sweet potato and avocado. I felt like a fraud. The money was great for someone who had just turned twenty-five, but the feeling of feeding America poison was not. I jumped one more time, to work as a contracted copywriter for a home products company that sold kitchen items, bowls and plates and utensils and choppers and shapers and ice cube trays and anything else you might think of needing in a kitchen. Plus, they said the plastic they used was BPA free, meaning they poison the public slightly less than the food chains I once worked for. My conscience was more at rest there.

But something inside of me still pushed back against the nine to five life, with the stifling clothing, with the guilt of writing for the purpose of selling things I wasn't sure anyone actually needed. I couldn't fully give myself over to my corporate overlords, who liked my work and wanted even more of it. I decided to continue working contractually, even when they approached me about full-time work—I liked the fact that I could work remotely and dress more casually. That I could take off more often for festivals. That I could get away nearly whenever I wanted without repercussions, as long as I got my work done. I was my own boss as a contractor. And as my own boss, I decided it was important to me to go to these festivals and feel something like myself, with my face painted and my hair braided and my body dressed in my favorite colorful camping rags.

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When the volunteer asked about mushrooms, Kimberly and I used our eyes to discuss whether or not to share with him. She shook her head ever so slightly. We did know where the volunteer could get some mushrooms, but we didn't have any desire get them for him. Our phones had been dead for days, so we couldn't call anyone to bring them over, and walking a

mile back to camp to get him some sounded too daunting in the frigid weather. We were relying strictly on ESP and weird chants or my bird calls to find our friends. Sometimes they worked. Other times they didn't. And sometimes we would attract people we didn't know who were also looking for a group that used bird calls to find each other.

At this same festival, I yelled "hootie hoo," forgetting that is was a lyric from an Outkast song that warns people that cops are around and not the call of an owl, and the people around me started to dart in different directions, concerned that an undercover was skulking within our midst.

"Sorry, so sorry, false alarm," I said to the people around me.

The volunteer told us that his mom sprained her ankle at Monterey dancing to Otis Redding when he played the song "Shake." There was no Spirit Care at Monterey, though. No paramedics, no nearby hospital. She spent a lot of time on shoulders for the rest of the fest. Her friends carried her around, helping her down onto blankets and chairs as they were made available.

I looked up Monterey Festival when we returned home, the walls of my small apartment closing in as I reminisced about sitting in my small tent out in a big meadow, and found an article from the *Monterey County Weekly* from 2001 that read, "Monterey was a strange place for the cultural revolution's launch. The town was still suffering from the after-effects of the sardine bust, and it had yet to establish its identity as a major tourist destination. Urban renewal had not yet transformed Alvarado, which by all accounts was a pretty seedy stretch of tattoo parlors, pool halls and beer joints. Cannery Row was a combination ghost town and giant jungle gym, a rusted

labyrinth where kids explored deserted buildings looking for old cannery labels and hobos slept amidst abandoned machinery."

That sounded about right to me, though. The term "sardine bust" made me laugh. What better place to have a festival than an unloved area with enough space for tens of thousands of people? What better place to have a festival than an area that needed an economic push? And what causes an economic push? Hippies weren't known for having money, but if a hundred thousand of them descend on a place, I guarantee that place is going to see dollars, if only for a short time.

There is plenty of evidence of festivals creating local economy boosts. In June 2015 the National Center for Business Journalism reported that California's two largest festivals, two of which I'm actually not very interested in attending because the first brings a celebrity crowd of people not there for the music, but to hopefully be featured in *Vogue*, and the second features only country music, which I don't much care for, Coachella and Stagecoach, brought "3,000 temporary jobs and $254 million into the local economy in 2012." Local businesses have to start preparing for the festivals weeks in advance for the nearly 80,000 people who attend each day. Another large festival in Austin, Texas, called South by Southwest (SXSW), that I haven't had the chance to attend yet but hope to eventually, combines music with tech and film, hosting workshops and networking opportunities along with up and coming bands and musicians, brought in $218 million to their local economy in 2013.

But with the crowds come case after case of overdoses, dehydration, and overheating, caused by carelessness about drinking enough water to stay hydrated, along with consumption of

bunk MDMA (molly) and LSD (acid), with some research chemicals thrown in here and there for good measure.

These overdoses created vigilantes. Perhaps the most well-known, The Bunk Police, a small organization that smuggles test kits into festivals and sells them for $20 a pop, started because founder Adam Auctor saw so much drug use at his first festival that he became concerned about the carelessness and decided he wanted to do something to prevent it. MDMA can be cut with caffeine, speed, opiates, meth, heroin. The list goes on. Auctor's kits detect these impurities and (hopefully) stop users from taking substances that identify as adulterated. But believe it or not, testing is discouraged at festivals due to the R.A.V.E. (Reducing Americans Vulnerability to Ecstasy) Act passed in 2003 by Joe Biden. The purpose of the act, word for word: "A bill to prohibit an individual from knowingly opening, maintaining, managing, controlling, renting, leasing, making available for use, or profiting from any place for the purpose of manufacturing, distributing, or using any controlled substance, and for other purpose."

Auctor was first allowed to offer testing for donations as a vendor, but lost nearly all of his ability to work the fests in 2015 due to the following argument from law enforcement and other ignorant organizations against the ever-growing scene: To offer testing might encourage more drug use, so to not offer testing may deter people from taking things if they're unsure of what they're taking.

But I'll tell you something about being unsure. Most people trust the person they're buying from. If they don't, they'll probably test at home, and then smuggle what they've bought into the festival, and if they can't test it, they'll probably smuggle it into the festival anyway.

There is no receipt or refunds for drugs. What you buy, you take. And while every festival I've ever been to has involved a car search and a body frisk, I've never had anything discovered or confiscated, except for a joint that I too trustingly put in a pack of cigarettes.

Shoes, bras, pockets, wallets, and smokes are the most common hiding places, and also the most searched. I've been behind many a dumb kid in line who has his or her shoes shaken out and lost a baggie of blow.

"Gotta boof it," I heard one guy say to another after they took three pretty pink pills from his wallet. Boofing is inserting drugs in your asshole for safe keeping. Literal assholes are pretty safe at the gates. Careless assholes who put things in their shoes are not.

The Bunk Police are most useful, in my opinion, for people who are trying to buy and sell within the festival. You can yell, "Who has LSD?" and have at least two people come up to you with offers. Others who are selling will whisper in your ear as they snake through the crowd, "Molly, weed, whipits, molly, weed, whipits." A mantra. It's easy to get what you need when you get it at home, but it's hard to tell who is telling you the truth in the crowd. Everything is the best you've ever had, the cleanest, the purest. It's often not, but at least the Bunk Police can tell you that if you take the risk of purchasing from a nameless nomad. People aren't going to stop bringing in drugs to sell or buying those drugs within the festival just because the Bunk Police aren't there.

In the volunteer's words about Monterey, "They did it mostly for the drugs." The people of the festivals of 2016 are really no different.

The volunteer eventually kicked us out of Spirit Care, disappointed we couldn't get him what he wanted. He gave us each a blanket as we left, printed with black lizards and brown and

red patterns that crossed over us as we swung them onto our backs, a needed layer. We dragged our feet and clung to each other, trying to keep the warmth from the space heater in our arms. Kim moved out in front of me to lead the way through the crowd, and I thought about how we could be mistaken for a couple of piles of blankets. We weren't all that different from anyone else.

LITTERED LIVERS

When I found out Palmer's father was dying from liver failure, I was drunk.

Palmer's dad was a large man, an ex-pilot, and an alcoholic with shiny eyes and a thick head of hair he combed in three strokes every half hour or so at their country club, where he would order the entire table beers and club sandwiches because, as he said, who doesn't like a goddamn club sandwich? I'd had at least half a dozen club sandwiches with the man in the brief year that my relationship with Palmer lasted. His dad wasn't around much, but when he was, he filled the room with indecent jokes and his own booming laughter, which sounded something like when thunder rolls over the ocean. It made people look up, and birds scatter. It made waiters nervous. It made every giggle I heard afterward sound insincere. It made me smile.

When Palmer called me about his father, I had been on a date with a new man, a man who treated me with something like respect, who found time to sneak behind me in the kitchen, kiss my neck, lift me to the counter, and tell me he wanted me and that all the bad things I thought about myself were untrue (and I trusted him when he said it). I was not a terrible person, I was not a loser, I would make something of myself, maybe I would be a writer someday, and things would be okay.

This new man was kind to me when I burrowed into my writing, cloaked myself in my favorite maroon microfiber blanket, and sat on the floor with my laptop between my legs lamenting about how I hated everything I was creating. He made dinner when I lost myself in the pages and forget to eat for hours. He never asked to read anything—instead he asked, "Would you like me to read it?" which I found thoughtful, because writing can be so private. And at that

time, my writing was almost entirely about Palmer, who lingered on my mind like the taste of a cigarette on a tongue.

We stayed at the bar until it closed. The night had gotten away from me, our bartender heavy-handed, and me feeling ornery over work, and as a result also feeling like I should drink as much as I used to with Palmer, only to find out at home in front of a white porcelain toilet that history does, in fact, repeat itself.

I answered Palmer's call in the new man's bed, where I lay with my knees over his, just as I used to with Palmer, an old habit. Back then, Palmer and I used smoky sheets to make a tent over our bodies, where the air stank of liquor and no one could tell us we were littering our livers. He wasn't the type to call even when he did love me, falling asleep before I returned home from my job as a waitress at a dilapidated Mexican restaurant and not waking up until halfway through the night, head heavy with whiskey and comforted by the *whoosh* of AC and a low TV, a drunk's favorite lullaby. It seemed strange for him to call after I'd left him months before, when I, straight bodied and long necked, took all of his glass replicas of torso and hips and smashed them in the sink, beading it with what was poisoning us, seemed strange. And there it was—his father was dying, would I come say goodbye? Yes, of course I would, my love for Palmer gone but my sympathy for him honest, and the new man, a good man with clean hands and dark hair, held me as I cried for Palmer in his bed.

When I first met Palmer he was living with my college weed dealer, Shorty, a nickname and friendly reminder of a height that he couldn't seem to grow out of. Palmer invited me stay, to go "bowl for bowl," as he called it, and we packed one bowl after the other after the other until we fell into a simultaneous nap on their decaying corduroy couch. I always woke up with his

fingers over mine. It felt romantic. I found myself staring at his short, blonde eyelashes when he would talk and wondering how soft they might be against my lips. What if I just kissed his eyelid, that soft spot right above them, where a blue vein ran through his left eyebrow? Would I feel it pulse? I imagined it for days until one day, I asked him to close his eyes. I put my hands around his neck and pulled him to me. I kissed each eyelid. They were soft. His forehead was warm against my nose. In that moment, I felt like I wanted him to love me.

When we started sleeping together, it was mostly about the sleep, not the together. My sexuality was dulled by my inebriation. Sex never lasted long, but we were having it, and that in itself was satisfying enough for two twenty-somethings with little experience (and for him, a young man with very few past partners, maybe something to prove). His body was as soft as his eyelids, and his hair was long and dirty blonde. He was not traditionally handsome, but he was interested and I was insecure and we were two potheads in college and in lust. It was ideal.

There's an old saying that "weed is a gateway drug." I don't find it untrue. I didn't love weed the first time I tried it. I got too high and my mind felt muddy and my tongue like slush. I couldn't really think or talk. It rendered me quiet and incapable of doing things such as having a conversation, let alone flirting, as I was trying so hard to do at 17 years old when I smoked my first joint with a neighborhood boy I found attractive but never seemed to impress. But when I figured out how to smoke it and how much to smoke, I found I liked the feeling it gave me, like being underwater, like being somewhere else. It also paired well with the alcohol we were constantly drinking.

Years after I left Palmer, five years into my relationship with the new man, I read an article in the *New York Times* that claimed, "Marijuana use is positively correlated with alcohol

use and cigarette use, as well as illegal drugs like cocaine and methamphetamine. This does not mean that everyone who uses marijuana will transition to using heroin or other drugs, but it does mean that people who use marijuana also consume more, not less, legal and illegal drugs than do people who do not use marijuana."

This wasn't untrue from my experience with Palmer. He was a cigarette smoker; I became a cigarette smoker. Eventually, we would smoke a cigarette after every single joint. After that, he wanted to try mushrooms, so we tried mushrooms. Then acid. Weed and alcohol were almost always part of these experiences towards the end of our relationship, but in the beginning, we didn't mix. We did research and read about the dangers and complications of doing them all at the same time and promised each other that we would keep things clean and separate. But the taste of them together when we gave in to our curiosity, the flow of them united in our bodies, the laughter and the tears and the euphoria, they started a wave of partying that we never wanted to crash down under. This partying would eventually lead me to the music festival scene, where everybody was riding that same wave.

At first, we were creating a festival space for ourselves without even realizing it. I wouldn't have my first festival experience for another year. But we knew the vibes we wanted when we were high, so we decorated his patio with glow-in-the-dark paintings of mushrooms we found online, tall white candles, colorful Christmas lights, green tapestries, and antiquated statues of Buddha that we would often find at garage sales or antique shops. We were obsessed with color. There was never enough. Eventually, all the cushions out back had mismatching patterns. We blacked out the mesh patio screens with large sheets so the lights would always shine the colors of the rainbow, even during the day. We would paint carelessly—canvases, our

faces, our friends, each other. We were full of life when life was full of color. We called it "The Trip Den," where we could be in the safety of his home, but still go on a trip. We were always trying to escape something: school, work, our nagging families who said they didn't see us enough anymore. I wonder now, if in the end, we were just trying to escape each other.

I loved waking up in the morning to the smell of pot and cigarettes, so strong on Palmer's sheets, on our skin, in our hair, to the beige curtain of his window highlighted by the sun. I loved how I never felt rushed, as Palmer's routines and general being were mostly quiet, slow-moving, snail-like, cautious, and careful, as though to move or think too much would be to risk hurting himself. He was so averse to injury, even getting bruised upset him. I loved his meandering, the care he put into each of his steps. It was so the opposite of me, talkative, overexerted, clumsy but reasonably resilient to injury, both physical and mental. We were so different, and in that I found a strange comfort. Maybe I could be someone else. Maybe I could be like him. Maybe I could slow down. Maybe I could stop caring so much about things and people, like him.

But getting drunk and high became the highlight of our romance. The thick lull of our heartbeats would become one as we cuddled on futons, couches, chairs, floors, rugs, stairs, anywhere that we could just sit and be together and smoke and drink. I started to become restless. I wanted to go out. I wanted to see my girlfriends. I wanted to start going to classes again. I wanted to think and learn about something more than just what he wanted to talk about. I wanted to do something besides sit in the The Trip Den.

Eventually, small disagreements turned into fights, and later the fights turned into wars. I was never afraid to cry, and he was never afraid to make me. He would explode, weed smoke

and incense surrounding us. He looked like a rocket ship at night, his voice getting increasingly louder and drowning mine out, both of us soaked in the red of the Christmas lights.

He told me late in our relationship it was how his father used to treat his mother. He told me it was all that he knew, his pride so extensive from seeing the example that his father made that he couldn't even see me through a haze of desire for power over me. But he always apologized, and with those apologies came gifts. Beautiful bottles of champagne, baggies of purple weed, expensive organic cigarettes. All of the things that brought us together were driving us apart.

Once I realized this, leaving was easy. One day, I just walked out. He was midsentence, and we were standing. I looked him in his blue eyes and said, "I can't do this." Walking out the front door was like walking into a new dimension. I noticed the neighbor's car was a Hyundai, that there were small pink flowers blooming next to the front stoop, and then I realized in that moment that I hadn't paid attention to anything but my toxic relationship that year. I never went back. Not even to get my things. But every time I see a painting of a mushroom, or a Buddha statue made of stone, I think of him.

Now, of course alcohol would unite us one last time through his father's liver, the suffering, shriveling organ depleted by the very substance that bonded us in the beginning stages of our reckless relationship. Of course it would.

At the hospital, Palmer's father reclined in a sea of green sheets that covered once thick legs by then thin as a young girl's. His face, previously always round and red, was emaciated. His arms were bruised, so weak that the IV caused injury. Believing him too feeble to embrace, I kissed him on the cheek, the skin familiar as the leather of an old, beloved purse. But he grabbed

my wrist with a strength that surprised me, that I should have known he would show even then, and breathed, “Take care of each other.”

But you don’t tell a dying man you won’t take care of his son because you can’t take care of someone who drinks so much as berates you, because his son cannot take care of himself, let alone you, because when you’re with him you both share the same disease that has damaged his liver beyond repair.

You just say, “OK,” and then you go home to the new man you know is there, awake and waiting for you to return.

IN A TENT, A HOME

Eureka!

In this case, it's not the cry of an epiphany—it's the brand of the six-pound five-ounce hiking tent that I sleep in when I go music festival camping around the country. The orange Eureka! Apex 2XT Fiberglass Two Person Backpacking Tent, with a floor area of 36.9 square feet, with ability to shrink to 24 by 5 inches when packed, with rain-proof fly and sticky zipper, with Velcro enclosures that choose when they want to work, with two side-openings for air venting, with mesh paneling that many people have squished their faces against to ask, "Are you alive in there?"

My tent has housed me, my ex-boyfriend B, my dog, my friend Maria—whose tent got stolen after she forgot to properly stake it while she was drinking ice cold IPAs in the middle of the afternoon—and a stranger in the night who got in not accidently, but intentionally, without realizing it was not, in fact, her tent.

She stayed until morning.

My tent has shielded countless coolers and sleeping bags, stored furry boots and silver parachute pants, and concealed purses with leather fringe that have identical-feeling pockets on the interior and always confuse me when it's dark and I'm out at the stages, rummaging around as bass blares and people dance beside me, always inebriated and often barefoot. *Where are my cigarettes? Where is my cell phone? Where is my lighter? Where is my debit card? My cash? Where is my hair tie? Has anyone seen any of those things? Wait, you have the lighter? Ok, it's all here, but god dammit, Maria, quit stealing my lighter.*

It has wielded great protective powers against the valley winds of the Gorge in Quincy, Washington, against searing hot sunlight in the dusty fields of Manchester, Tennessee, and against that one guy who walked around in Suwannee, Florida. yelling, "Does anyone have a straw so I can drink my milkshake?" (Plot twist: There are no milkshakes in the woods. He needed the straw to snort cocaine.)

My tent has become part of my backpack. It fits perfectly into the left side, taking up only a corner when packed, but creating enough room for two to sleep comfortably when unpacked. It has been stepped on, tripped over, crashed into, and almost abandoned after B and I woke up late and had to pack *quickly, quickly, faster, move,* so we could catch a flight back to Orlando from Seattle in the dead of night.

"I can't leave her," I pleaded with B.

"It was only a hundred dollars," he said to me as he stuffed clothing into his duffle. "We can get another one."

I clung to her in anguish. There would never be another tent like her, so small and bright and sweet, my tangible solace sitting safely in the middle of our rainbow tent cities, the orange color beckoning in daylight and softly aglow at night when we crack glow sticks and leave them sticking out of the gold grommets in an effort to guide ourselves home as we, bleary-eyed and ears ringing, stumble back from stages that spit smoke and fire and sound so loud that we have to mouth things to each other in the crowd, like *Maria, I swear to god if you took the fucking lighter again…*

At my begging, B helped me break the tent down. I ended up carrying her to our rental car like a baby, black fiberglass poles and stakes and snaps all wrapped inside the soft carrot-

colored vestibule, a small house in my two hands. I patted it like a cat in my lap when I got in the front seat and watched the highway greenery go by through the wet windows, comforted by its presence and weight on my legs.

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Even before I had my Eureka, one of my favorite parts of camping was watching what we call "Tent City" go up. I like to set up Eureka right in the middle, where I feel safe and protected from the foot traffic that passes during all hours of the day as people walk to and from their own campsites. All hands are on deck when Tent City is being erected. Stakes are slammed and material is ripped and there is often a yell or two when the poles are put in wrong and someone has to start over. It doesn't take long, but it will hold you up from the fun, the mockery of life that these festivals make. All your responsibilities are gone. Work is over. School doesn't exist. All you need is your tent and a crew and some booze and a buzz and a joint and a high, and you're off, *zoom*, *zoom*, head up, feet down, smile wide and sincere when you realize you have escaped the real world, again. You have 48 to 96 hours to indulge in this false reality with 20,000 to 90,000 other people who are also just trying to escape the monotony of a desk, the disappointment of home, their truths, their actualities.

Eureka's website's official product description of my tent is: "Lightweight, compact, and built to withstand the elements, the two-person Apex 2XT tent is ideal for backpacking and wilderness camping. This versatile three-season tent assembles easily with a free-standing fiberglass frame. Durable waterproof fabric, raised floor seams, bathtub floor, and a full coverage fly, provide reliable protection from the elements."

My official review of that description: I don't know what the hell a bathtub floor is, but reliable, Eureka certainly has been. She only failed me once during a rainstorm in Winter Garden, Florida, where I sought out a yoga festival called Zen Awakening that ended up mostly being a Burner reunion, a gathering of experienced festival goers who have been through the party and plight of Burning Man in Black Rock Desert in Nevada. Zen Awakening had a pretty terrible showcase of electronic trap music that played from poorly built stages until 6 in the morning. One of the stages was a DIY stage, meaning anyone who thought they were a DJ could set up and play for the meandering crowds that passed, or for the tweakers that were still up at 4 a.m. and, in this case, passing out mushrooms for free to anyone who was willing to stay up with them.

To me, trap music is as obnoxious as it is enjoyable. As the music grew into an integral part of the electronic music scene, I learned that it originated in the 90s through hip hop—the "trap" being a place where drugs are sold and therefore a place that has warranted the bragging of big name rap artists since the origination of hip hop—and was adopted by electronic dance music in the early 2000s. I read in *LA Weekly* that original trap music is "characterized by soulful synths, 808s, the pan flute, sharp snares and long, syrup-slurred vowels." When it was adopted by EDM, it intermingled with a genre called dubstep—which is thumping, bass-heavy, and very industrial. It sounds something like Transformers fighting and causing car accidents, but with rhythm. One might connect these sounds with corrosion of the mind. But there's a highlight, a big monster sound that we look for—the bass drop.

Call it cliché, but festival audiences beg for it, screaming and crying and wailing as the frequencies get higher and higher and higher and then: a slam, another slam, more slams, faster,

stronger, longer. And we know it's typically coming after four counts of eight (one, two, three, four, five, six, seven eight; one, two, three, four, five, six, seven eight; one, two, three, four, five, six, seven eight; one, two, three, four, five, six, seven eight; BASS), but a good DJ will occasionally trick you or troll you when the drop is coming, and the crowd will worship him for it. These crowds live for surprise. They live for what they don't know or expect. It's part of the magic of this un-reality. This music, it's an unleashing.

After years of listening to classic rock and heavy metal with my dad, I compare dubstep to metal. It's not unheard of to see a mosh pit or get a bloody nose. Popular choruses range from "Fuck that shit," to "Start a motherfucking street fight," to "Everybody get foolish," and the crowd will yell every word, with middle fingers up and fists swinging and bodies out of control. They feel good there. They feel like someone else, the someone that they can't be at the desk or behind the computer or in the house. They feel like a stranger, and they love that stranger because they see that stranger in the others around them, unabashedly dancing, sloshing beer and shouting into the blue void above.

I've seen many friends become overwhelmed by these trap crowds, inching back to get to the edge and veer off to something else, smaller people hiding behind bigger people to be spared from the swinging fists and aggressive fits of rage that mostly men showcase when this music comes on. What is it about men and metal? What is it about men and anger? I watch them in these situations with a mix of amusement and concern. Rebellious behavior is a permeating thread at these festivals. It's sort of why we're all there in the first place, I think. To rebel against societal norms. To seek that thing or be that thing that is the Other.

We call the men who act out shamelessly as the Other, “wooks.” They’re usually on PCP or six hits of acid, shirtless and sweaty, with dirt mustaches and split eyebrows. They’re violent and kind at the same time, losing themselves in the sound and not realizing when they elbow someone in the cheek, but apologizing as soon as they do. They stay out all night and bark at the sky as they struggle through the fields to find their way back to their own Tent City, while we huddle in the middle of ours whispering, “Shh, they might hear us.” Tent City is only safe as the wook that climbs in over the maze of rope and wire that bind the tents to the earth, and asks, “Does anyone here have any nitrice?”

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At Zen Awakening, I hadn’t set up the olive green tarp underneath my Eureka right on the first night, and an inch of water nearly ruined my sleeping bag. I tried to nap under a canopy with a yoga instructor named Evan, who kept me up for hours trying to explain imaginary numbers and the significance of the Fibonacci sequence, the numbering system of nature, he called it, while he did acro-yoga with a partner. She climbed on him, wrapping the crook of her elbow around his neck and standing on his thigh with one foot, the other arm and leg extended and parallel, hand open-faced and fingers waving as if to say, “Watch this.” She came down gracefully as he moved to lie on his back, his legs erect, and massaged her shoulders while she hung in between his legs upside down, her thighs crossed and braced by his feet. When the rain stopped, he took a hit of acid and climbed a tree that looked like it had been struck by lightning, its wood rough and twisted, and passed down pieces of bark for us to examine.

“Do you see the face? Do you see the face on that one? The Earth is always speaking to us,” he said.

I wasn't sure that I saw faces in any of them, but I rolled them in my hands and nodded dutifully, passing them along to the next person in the circle that had grown below the tree.

Later, I slept through the afternoon in my sundried orange wigwam and saw the sullen, woody faces of trees in my dreams.

I decided to go to a dream workshop on the festival schedule the following day. The map they provided was small and confusing. I found a group of campers gathered in a field of tall reeds and swamp just beyond the rocky road that flowed through the campsite. We looked at each other, blinking and quiet.

"Is anyone here leading the dream workshop?" I asked.

Everyone shook their heads.

"Is this a trick to get one of us to lead the dream workshop on our own?" someone asked.

We all chatted. It could be true.

"Is this a dream?" someone else said. He had no shirt, and wore a fedora that reminded me of Peter Pan.

A man on a bicycle whizzed by.

"That workshop doesn't exist," he called out to us.

"None of us exist," whispered Peter Pan. He was sweating and anxious. I realized he was a wook. I started to creep backwards as I looked at the map. Maybe, I thought, I would try the Tantric Handholding Workshop or Gardening Herbs with Your Companion Gnome instead.

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Even when I'm back home, I can see the inside of my tent with my eyes closed, how it's cathedral-like in the dark, the blackness of night so large and so close, its lines and patterns

emerging when my eyes adjust. I know the exact sounds it makes when we're setting it up, how the clips snap across the poles and hammer thumps on the stakes. I know how it preserves the smell of grass and rainstorms even a month after we've been camping, and how it looks when its many clothed-parts are dismantled and draped over chairs in the backyard when it smells of things much worse—wet weed, spilled beer, throw up. I feel guilty when we stay in hotels, sleeping in white sheets and wasting the water of a tiled shower that's not ours.

When I come back from festivals, I tend to purge my closet and take things to Goodwill. I spend less money grocery shopping, and become clever with what's already in the pantry. I sit outside more. I shower less. I don't put on makeup. I sweat shamelessly in the sun. I feel more comfortable in my skin, barefoot, willowy and free. I become averse to the TV. The laugh tracks seem aggressive after hearing the sounds of joy bubble up from people's guts as we pass around food and joints we brought to share. Our community of campers is so generous that in these camping moments, when we are spread out around our fire and singing to each other, or while we're kissing each other goodnight and tucking into our tents, I think we forget that we all actually deep down probably want to be rich. How life would be easier if we were.

But life is so simple in a tent. There are no rooms to vacuum, no bathrooms to clean, no dishes to wash. There are no dusty shelves or mirrors, no pizza flyers on the front door that you never asked for, no baskets of dirty laundry to avoid. There is no electricity to overuse and no bill to pay. There is only the tent that holds you and another person. That holds a few treasured articles of festival clothing. That holds a cooler. Or a friend. Or a stranger. That makes us rich with a million memories. That is home.

Eureka.

WHEN THE FIRE DANCERS COME ALIVE AT NIGHT

Here are just a few of the ways you can play with fire: fire staffs, nearly five feet long, slender and branch-like, for rolling in the hands, up the arms, and around the shoulders; five-wicked fire fans that look like large spiders, bottom weighted for easy control by the palm; fire wands, for fire forced down the throat; baton-like fire devil sticks, lit at both ends and juggled; fire nunchucks, for rotating giant circles of flame that leave circles of light underneath the eyelid if you catch sight of them for even a moment; fire chain poi, spun by hand to make fire spheres taller than any human; six-wicked fire hoops, for standing within the fire while hula hooping; fire balls, for juggling a small flame protected by a Kevlar cage; fire hand lamps, held in the hand as the dancer does acrobatics; fire swords, for performing contact tricks and flaming sword fights with another person; fire torches, for swinging fire high in the sky while holding just a knob in your hand; fire whips, for making lightning sounds by cracking the flames.

There are more, I'm sure.

But how often do any of us run into fire dancers? Even with all the tools out there to control earth's hottest element, the answer is probably never.

This is less true at many festivals, where organizers scout the country for the most talented flow artists, professional fire spinners, hula hoopers, and jugglers, who tend to mix their talents with martial arts, yoga sequences, and belly dance. Fire dancing is the most dangerous, and needs to be approved by the local fire marshal. After approval is granted, there's often, nowadays at least, a social media contest inviting the best of the best to submit videos for online selection. Festivalgoers vote for their favorites if this is the case, or the festival handpicks them.

During my second year at Hulaween, I found out that the fire dancers come out near midnight, and make a large circle in the sand by what they call Spirit Lake, a bend in the Suwannee River that the festival makes into an interactive art space. Hulaween is essentially open twenty-four hours straight, so Spirit Lake is riddled with entertainment. When night falls, laser light shows shine over the water, and giant works of art built from metal, wood, or both, spray fire over our heads, the perfect complement to the flames spun by the dancers. One of the wooden installations in 2015 was shaped like a giant baby that would cry fire every hour, flame spurting from its mouth as coals burned in its stomach and orange heat shined through its sides. Fest-goers used it as a giant heater when it was cold out. But at a festival like Sasquatch, held overlooking dark valleys of Washington state and shut down at 2 a.m., fire entertainment is nowhere to be found. Some festivals that have hosted performers for years invite back their favorites, the biggest crowd pleasers, annually, and make fire dancing part of the schedule—you know where to go to see it at a certain time.

And other times you end up in a random field at Hulaween near the bat house, a small house about the size of a New York studio apartment on stilts that serves as a roosting habitat for the multiple brown and gray and black bat species of the area, with a dancer named Henri and his nameless apprentice. I watched as they set up a circle of tiki torches in a small field that the tents hadn't reached. I was most definitely lost.

"Sit," Henri said after we introduced ourselves. I sat. He was wearing a patched vest and khaki colored joggers that hung off of his waist. He did not introduce Apprentice, whose eyes and skin looked both light and tan in the dark. I imagined that he was from some faraway place

with some exotic name and was traveling and studying under his maestro, Henri, who was clearly in charge.

I sat at the edge of the circle and watched as Henri lit one end of a fire staff, then tapped each side of Apprentice's fire staff.

"Start," he said to Apprentice.

Apprentice was shirtless and strong. His hair was almost completely shaved, his scalp shining in the light. His pants were long and baggy, but fitted around the ankle. I feared they would catch on fire. At first, his feet were still. He began moving the staff in his left hand, rolling the center, wrapped in black duct tape, over the back of his left hand, under the palm of his right, over the back of his right, under the palm of his left. He did this for a minute, then rotated it into the right hand, bringing the thumb of the left hand to heart's center. He moved into a classic baton twist, spinning circles in front of himself, then behind his back, never removing the other hand from the half prayer at his heart. His feet moved. He paced, slowly. He threw the staff in the air, caught it, and twirled it near my face. My eyelashes clotted, the mascara wet from the dewy night and heated by the flame.

He rotated the staff over his shoulder, rested it on his neck, then gently rolled it over his neck in circles.

"Now," Henri said to him.

This threw him off. The flame tapped his back as he moved to catch the staff from his neck. It burned him. He winced. I noticed puffy scars ran up and down his spine and the back of his arms. They were pink and new. They hurt.

He threw the staff high in the air, caught it, and formulated a dance of martial arts and pirouettes, the flame his companion. He got more aggressive in his movements. He was angry at himself for the hurt. But at least he caused it himself. I thought to myself, at least he knew a hurt that would overtake other hurts. Maybe, with this fire in his hands, no one could ever hurt him.

Henri got up, and lit his own staff with Apprentice's.

They began to spar. It seemed both choreographed and improvised. They circled each other, tapping the staffs together like swords. One would spin; the other would kick. Then the staffs would make contact that shook sparks into the grass. Flames started to take shape—circles and diamonds as staffs touched. Henri drew an octopus in the sky with swift movements. I could see it for hours under my eyelids when I blinked. They danced around each other, getting increasingly more playful, until Henri jousted Apprentice, stopping the staff just before the fire hit the skin of his sternum.

"Never forget," he said to him, "you are playing with fire."

Apprentice bowed deeply.

I clapped.

"I'm not done," said Henri."

I felt compelled to stay, even though the weather got much colder and I still had no idea where my tent was. I nodded at him. He took a knee, tucked the center of the staff in his armpit, and held an open palm out to the small crowd that I didn't realize was behind me.

"If you are going to stay, you are going to stay until the end. If you are going to go, go now," he tells them. I got the feeling that we had an understanding, like he wasn't addressing me because he knew I was there to stay.

His drama moved me. A man who plays with fire gets so little respect. I imagined him as a child. He was probably considered strange. I imagined his life. He probably worked odd jobs to get from festival to festival to perform. He probably had a caravan that had both deeply supported him and perhaps robbed him a time or two. He had grown his hair into long, dreaded braids piled on top of his head like dirty blonde whipped cream topping. He had been walked out on. He wouldn't let that happen this time, in the dark of night, while he performed for free for an ungrateful audience. I would be grateful. Something beautiful was happening between this man and his apprentice. I sensed a romance, but it could just be the kind of romance one has with their art. Always striving to perfect it, always feeling disappointed. Falling more in love with it because it evades you. Feeling both inspired and defeated by it.

I mouthed at him and pointed to the ground, "I'm staying."

He winked at me and snapped at someone off to the side of the circle in the dark. The stranger brought me a lukewarm hotdog, in bun, and with mustard.

I felt the tingle of emotional pressure behind my eyes. The euphoric high I felt earlier sank into a slow comedown. My body was so tired, but my mind was moving as my eyes followed the fire. I nibbled the hot dog out of gratitude, though my appetite was weak. I thought about writing about Henri, how maybe someday I could bring his art to justice with my own art, with words.

There was-music in Henri's mind that I couldn't hear. I imagined a small violin playing in his head, the strings vibrating against his mind. He moved with his eyes closed. He was nimbler than Apprentice, who was nameless and faceless under his hood as he took his spot behind the circle with his caravan. Every inch of Henri's body flowed and curled gracefully as he

rolled the staff from his wrist to his neck, rotated it, and let it roll down the other side of his body. He caught it, kicked it, caught it again. He lowered his stomach to the ground and crawled gracefully with one hand spinning the staff above him above him, then flipped to his back and let the staff rest on his feet. He spun it with his ankles, knees tucking and kicking above him. He stood to catch it. His face carried a look of desire so strong that I felt tears. He was in his element.

The people who decided to stay did exactly that, mesmerized by the movements of his body, by the power he wielded over dangerous flames. When he put his hands out to let us know that it was over, many of us cried and clapped. I clapped the loudest. He finished by putting the flames out with speed, twisting the staff between his hands on either side of his body until the flame had no fight left. He bowed like a yogi, bringing his hands to his heart and his face to his knees.

Henri and I embraced as the crowd dispersed. His skin warmed my arms and chest. I could feel the heat of him through my cold clothing. I clung to him for a second. I wanted to hold on to this heat for the aimless walk back to my icy tent.

"Please tell your apprentice I thought he was magical," I said to him.

"You mean Joe?"

I laughed about this the whole way back to camp as I stumbled down the dirt road and pushed pine needles out of my face and tripped over the ropes holding down others people's wigwams. Joe, the boy whose eyes matched his skin, who I thought hailed from faraway lands. Joe, Henri said, from Georgia.

When I woke up the next morning, I felt the sincere presence of peace. It filled my little orange tent and made it breathe above me. I felt like I had witnessed something special, this man and his merry band of fire dancers, hiding in the woods, creating circles of love and trust, handing out hotdogs to strangers.

I tried to explain the experience to my friends as we gathered around a new fire, a day fire in the center of our camp. The air was cool, and I was finally warm again.

The story fell flat on my tongue. A man who played with fire—why does that not sound as exciting to the ear as it is to see it with the eye? They laughed when I told them the hotdog had mustard.

"You know gypsies hate corporate conglomerations, but love their hotdog condiments," someone said meanly.

"Did someone say hotdog? We have extra. We're packing up."

And there he was, Henri, with his long locks released and cascading down his back and what looked like fifteen aluminum foil wrapped hot dogs stacked in his arms. My friends grabbed greedily, thanking him and bowing their heads. We made eye contact.

"Do I know you?" I said to him as I took a hot dog.

"You could say that," he said.

We both smiled. I watched his shirtless back as he walked away, looking for the fleshy, pink tattoos, the scars of his art. They were healed and dark in his skin. They were old. He was good at what he did. He was good enough not to hurt.

REBECCA

My friend was lighting a slim, short joint perfectly rolled in Tops paper the first time I saw Rebecca. She was hard to miss. She had a full-sized brown comforter with her that dragged behind her on the ground. I saw her again that same day in a small crowd at a bluegrass set, looking like a hunchback with the blanket wrapped around her shoulders. Another time, while I was ordering a falafel stacked with soggy lettuce and warm tzatziki that I think was probably just ranch dressing, she passed by me with it in her arms. When night came, I wound up sitting right behind her while waiting for the headliner to come on. She was sitting under the comforter with a group too big for it. Legs and knees and ankles peeked out of all the corners, and I wished I had brought a blanket with me. The temperature had dropped to a cool fifty degrees, and the damp Florida humidity created a slick chill in the air.

It was the last night of the festival, a Sunday. People danced around us wrapped in Christmas lights, swinging neon hula hoops, or pumping umbrellas made to look like jellyfish in the air. Sitting in the dark under their jiggling, glowing bodies was almost like being underwater. High frequencies of the wailing guitars echoed between us as we sat in the grass, wet and cold. The sounds were tangible to me at that point, my mind dulled and seeing things, dark black notes that I could catch and hold with my fists if I lifted them in the dark.

My friend crushed a press of MDMA the color yellow and shaped like the Warner Brothers logo into powder and held the glowing dust in the palm of her hand. I call it a press, straightforward and simple, but the electronic music scene has many names for MDMA that is presented in a press form, meaning it has been compounded from a powder to a solid: Beans, rolls, candy, hug drugs, and disco biscuits (also the name of a popular festival jam band) being

the most common. They also come in varying shapes and sizes. We've seen an interesting variety come through Florida: green rectangles with the Snapchat logo; orange diamonds pressed with glitter and stamped with the Tesla car logo; yellow cutouts of Bart Simpson's head; pink circles stamped with an image of Walter White, the infamous lead character from Breaking Bad, with his Heisenberg hat on; red monkeys; red Nikes; red Supremes; white dominoes; white Batmans, green M&Ms, purple butterflies; pink Oreos; pink Redbulls; yellow stars. Potency varies as much as shape does, but most of them are euphoria in 230 to 250 milligrams.

We took turns wetting our pinkies with our tongues and then dipping our fingertips in the dust until they looked like Q-tips. I sucked on my finger and then quickly drank a few large sips of beer to avoid the taste, which is so metallic and bitter that it's not uncommon to gag as it goes down. Sometimes, though, it smells slightly sweet and sharp, like aniseed, and when I catch that scent first it doesn't taste bad at all.

There are Reddit boards full of conversations about how to stop the dry heaving that rolls over some people after they ingest it. Some say to drink Pepto-Bismol prior to indulging. Others say to have peppermints handy at all times. Another suggestion is to take 5-HTP, an over the counter serotonin substitute, and vitamin C before rolling. And then there are the realists: "If you're going to take this shit then you're going to feel sick at some point, period. You're essentially poisoning yourself. You can't hide from it every time."

Presses have been so much a part of my festival experience I only rarely feel sick, I build a tolerance throughout the weekend to where I barely feel anything at all. On the first day of the festival, the warm and fuzzies took over right away, my head bobbing and throbbing and ankles twisting and contorting to any sound I heard. How it felt so good to hug. How it felt so good to

speak. To listen. But on the last day of the festival, it took a lot of supplementing to get the first day effects. Joint after joint, beer after beer, half a press here, half a press there. It all blurred together as we leisurely walked from stage to stage and spoiled ourselves in what I would call total degeneracy.

I heard the girl with the comforter say goodbye to her friends. They got up, slowly, one by one, and left the blanket on the ground. Only a portion of it covered her legs. MDMA has always made me talkative, often to the point of elation. So when I saw her alone after catching sight of her all day, in a crowd of nearly, 30,000, I felt like I had to meet her. Serendipity, the right opportunity, and all that. So I did the type of thing you could only do at a festival, where friendliness is universal and being kind to everyone is inherent and expected. Emboldened by my new chemical balance, I crawled forward to her and got under her blanket.

"Is this ok?" I asked her.

"It's ok," she said. "Just don't take it. It's all I own."

She wasn't kidding. Her name was Rebecca, and she had been following the festival headliner, String Cheese Incident, around the country for three years. We talked animatedly about how much we both loved the six-piece jam-band from Colorado, "so fucking much," "they're the fucking best," "I live for them." The band formed in 1993, four years after I was born, garnering a collective following not unlike Phish, Widespread Panic, or Grateful Dead. It wasn't music the kind of music that I grew up with. It was just music I fell in love with through experience. The first time I saw them in 2011, I understood why they had such a huge fan base: Their relentless energy, radical talent, and never ending crescendos carried my mind miles away, to a white room in my head full of nothing but the sound of their instruments. I've fallen into

meditation so deep at String Cheese sets that people sometimes think I'm sleeping, but I'm awake, at peace with their swelling tempos.

As usual at String Cheese shows, the jellyfish totems amassed around us, perpetual symbols of the crowd's undying love for the sound for the band, and honoring their song "Jellyfish," which starts, "My brain is just a jellyfish in the ocean of my head/'Cuz I drank too much tequila, and I woke up seein' red/And now I all I really want from life is to crawl back into bed/On account that my brain is just a jellyfish in the ocean of my head." Rebecca was sort of new to the festival scene, she told me, and she was typically one of many who carried a jellyfish totem through the crowd. Her jellyfish had been destroyed, trampled by dancing feet, after she passed out in a field at a String Cheese set a week earlier.

Individually, the jellyfish totems look the same, big transparent plastic bulbs with pink and blue and purple lights lighting them up from the inside and paper streamers hanging down the sides like soft tentacles that bounce and wave as the people below them change color in the zig-zagging rainbow lights shining out from the stage. Alone, they're haphazardly beautiful. Together, they make an ocean in the sky.

I loved looking at Rebecca, her black hair uncombed, her mouth large, her teeth crooked and white and green in the light that reached between peoples elbows to our faces. She spoke loudly into my ear with a rasping voice, bending her neck like a lover to put her lips to the lobe. I breathed her in. I smelled marijuana and sourness on her breath. She was high. I was high. We were best friends in that moment, two girls seated in a field of friendly costumed freaks. I could tell she felt at home in that space the way I felt at home.

She told me a “phenomenal LSD trip” triggered her desire to leave office life forever years before. She heard in String Cheese’s music a calling to be more creative. In the colors of the lights, she saw her future, bright and languid. She saw herself painting, and dreamed vivid images of herself as an artist with paint in her hands and in her hair. She had been working as a recruiter at a staffing agency when she heard it, felt it. She was unfulfilled there and she had been for a long time. She was smoking weed and drinking a bottle of wine nearly every day, trying to medicate herself to sleep before another monotonous morning of waking up and faking it.

I cupped my hand to hear her better; it was almost like listening to myself. And then, she said, she triple-dosed, taking three hits of acid, the most she had ever consumed at one time, at a Cheese show and life changed the way that it does, suddenly and without warning.

“How do you survive?” I asked her when she explained she was living and camping in a small sedan that she had paid off while she was still working. It struck me that she was homeless. Then it struck me that I was jealous, not that she was homeless, but that she was so free. I romanticized her life in my imagination—there she was, shoeless, jiving, laughing. I imagined mountains and beaches behind her. In that same moment I felt ungrateful for what I had. The homeless do not often choose to become homeless, and anyone who had struck hard times would likely have gladly traded places with pretty Rebecca at her cushy job and in her decent apartment. How privileged she was to be able to give up things that other people so desperately need.

I saw something in Rebecca that I wanted: total carefreeness. I had a job that paid my bills, a house with reasonable rent, a big, furry dog that I could afford food for, a plethora of friends that kept me busy, and still had the ability to make time for punctuated escape to these

festivals. This girl, on the other hand, didn't have a job, a rent, a pet, a secure network of friends, and lived a life of only festivals, and didn't have a care in the world as a result. She was wholly herself, not driven by money or looks or societal expectations. She was unshowered, unshaven, and unshakeable in her pursuit of a life that fulfilled her. She lived off of a small savings and worked odd jobs in whatever town she stopped in, waitressing or bartending for a month, then packing up and hitting the road to follow the band to their next stop. She volunteered at festivals and shows to see Cheese for free, picking up trash or manning the ATM booths or directing traffic and helping the handicapped get around for four to six hours a day. It was easy to slip away, though, she said. No one was hard on anyone. They were all there for the same reason, to dance madly at all the Cheese sets and meet new people.

"Like you," she said as she hugged me.

I want this, I thought. *I want all of it*.

We held hands and touched shoulders for the rest of the set, swaying in unison to everything from organ solos to bass-heavy blues to soul-slamming strumming and a little fast fiddle. *Rebecca, Rebecca*, I sang to her if the lyrics sounded like her name at all. I liked making this girl laugh. I liked the illusion of helping her escape from whatever it is she was running from. I was still living an office life, in her words, beyond this festival. I was trying to escape myself and that life for a few days, but I wasn't running away. As much as I admired her insouciance, I realized in that moment that difference was important to me. When you start running, when do you stop? If you spend enough time wandering, do you just end up even more lost? For Rebecca, it had been years of nights that likely mixed together in the ocean of her head.

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There had been others like Rebecca, festival girls that I adored. My first year at Bonnaroo in Tennessee, there was silver-haired Nina, young and free, a freshman in college to my sophomore. She would dance around me with a baton tipped with rainbow ribbon and sing out loud to every song she knew. For years after the festival, I was expected at her family's home in the summer, to suck on popsicles in the pool and reminisce about camp.

Then there was Kim, tall, blonde, covered in blinking twinkle lights, who I met my second year at Bonnaroo while we were sitting on the same blanket in the grass outside of what's called the Christmas Barn, a little barn soaked in green and red lights, decorated with fake snow and mechanical Santas singing "ho ho ho" and plastic reindeer on the roof. The barn played only electronic house music, which made sense in this weird little world, and Kimberly and I bonded over the fact that we both had adorable rescue dogs waiting for us back home. She eventually became my best friend.

Then there was Mackenzie, never without her brown, round, felt hat, my first year at Sasquatch in Washington state. Mackenzie would sound sad even when she laughed. She worked as a nurse, and brought syringes so she could inject ripe, sweet clementines with vodka and pass them out at camp to unknowing strangers who would take the fruit to snack on and then be met with a surprise as the slices of citrus made it into their mouths. Years later, she would invite me to her wedding.

Then there was Amanda at Zen Awakening in Florida, who always emerged from her tent with gold paint on her face, and who had a British fiancé who called molly "mandy." They told us stories about living in a van in Thailand for a year as we huddled under a canopy and rain

poured around us in the woods and passed around slices of cold cucumber from their cooler to share. I still see her every six months.

All of these girls ended up being like me—living what society would identify as a "real life," with a job and a house and a car, and because of that we were able to function as friends outside of the festival setting. We had a commonality: A love of escape and the unpredictability that the festivals presented us with, but an understanding of what we had to do, or even wanted to do, to make that escape possible for ourselves.

But my memory of dark-haired Rebecca with a mouth so wide and white, it looked like a crescent moon, is important because I never saw her again. Because maybe to Rebecca, all girls in fields who aren't like her are the same, each one a blade of grass, different in size and shape, but similar in ways that make them undiscernible later, except for the fact that they were chained down to things that she had long forgotten.

After the show, I eased out from under the blanket. She stood with me and pinched my right cheek. I felt how oily and dirty my face was on her fingertips.

"Good soul, I'll see you again," she said.

"Did you ever paint anything?" I asked her.

I felt like I was asking myself. If I left my desk, would I actually ever write my book? Do girls like us ever do the things we say we'll do? Maybe we're just here to get high. Maybe our art is a lie, an excuse to be here.

She didn't hear me. Or maybe she did. She pinched my cheek again and bowed her head before she walked away.

I watched her swim through the crowd of neon jellyfish until I couldn't see her anymore, her black hair swallowing her as she moved, a mermaid, a unicorn, a lost girl in an underground world. I listened to myself breathe her out. It sounded like the sea in a shell.

THE INTANGIBLE EVERYTHINGS

ME

My eyes open. They are red-rimmed. They are their darkest hazel. My tongue is a mountain in my mouth, swollen from sucking on cigarette after cigarette in loud crowds of people bumping elbows and hips and ankles. My teeth are sand, gritty and ashy as they grind against each other and into my gums, creating long crevices where my canines meet and dig into the underside of my lips. My inner cheeks are as dry as a drought, barren, earthy, hardened. I'm lying on my back. I fumble for a plastic bottle. *Water*. My body is so tired that to move a shoulder is to ache. My body is so tired. My body is so tired.

This time, I am at Electric Forest in Rothbury, Michigan, where it's so damn hot and dusty, I have to wear a bandana over my mouth whenever I walk or I choke on the dirt kicked up by 45,000 dancing hooligans like me. I am so, so tired.

But there is no such thing as tired at camp, a space in an open field homier than a house will ever be to me, the place we'll go back to after hours on foot, euphorically happy and mildly delirious.

Delirium is a requirement of music festival camping. *Sleep is for the weak, sleep is for children, sleep is for our parents, sleep is for the dead. We'll sleep when we get back to Florida, we'll sleep for most of our lives, we'll sleep over 200,000 hours before we die, sleep is the cousin of death, we'll sleep when we're dead.* These are the things we say to each other after we wake up and trudge through restless crowds, on to the next set, to the next set, to the next set.

We allow each other to rest our heads as the sun is coming up, and sometimes even after, but we won't be down for long. A four-hour nap, maybe more, maybe less, will take us headfirst

into a new day. We'll drink beer and do lines of cocaine a la carte for breakfast. We'll shower using gallon jugs of water from the grocery store just outside of this podunk town, lined with greenery and a Walmart every other mile. We'll use a half gallon a person a day. We'll play caretaker and hairdresser, washing and brushing each other so we don't have to pay for or walk to the trailer showers a mile away from our cluster of tents. I will lose the shampoo, like I always do. I will lose the car keys, the candy, the sleep mask, the credit cards, the license, the whole damn wallet, again, like I always do.

"Are you serious?" my friends will say.

I am serious. I'm as serious as Heath Ledger's Joker, wild-eyed and face painted. I'm sick with the crazy by the time we get back to camp, smile stretching, pupils dilating, fingers twitching, laughter maddening. I have no time for those worldly possessions when the music is on, thumping, bumping, erasing that there is a larger place beyond camp, a house, with lots more worldly possessions, all those strange things that we fill our homes with because they fill space.

Back at home, we're always trying to fill space. The coffee table has a plant, the dining room table a centerpiece. The couch has things called throw pillows, that look pretty, but often don't serve the typical pillow purpose—when are they ever actually comfortable? The dresser has a lamp, a picture frame, another picture frame, another picture frame, small portals into times that were better than the one we're having at home. Why else do we look at pictures? To fill the mind with memories, with feelings we once had. *Fill, fill, fill.*

I often have to fight urges when I'm at home to throw everything away. And this is why I love to camp: Less is more when you're on the road. The experiences fill me up more than any well-decorated bedroom ever could.

But sometimes, I don't feel full at camp. I feel conflicted. I think: *You are an artist. But here you are, always celebrating the art of others instead of working on your own.* My art is writing, and I write the most at home. But the art I spend the most time with is music, and the music keeps me away from home.

So I try to journal the long festival days in my iPhone as we dance from stage to stage, as our minds wander in our heads and our feet tap and knees buckle beneath our adrenaline-rushed bodies. I try to write as I'm jogging from stage to stage, try to write as I catch my breath and we pick a spot to sway in for twenty minutes, before we're off and running again. I try to note the dialogue of my friends, always outlandish and absurd. Like the time my friend Kirt said, "You never realize how hard you are tripping until you go into a porta potty." Or a guy in the crowd yelling, "It's almost October, let's party!" when it was only the end of June. Or my friend Andres saying, "I have to keep drinking because if I stop drinking now I'll just get sleepy. We're out of drugs and espresso doesn't even tickle my nutsack."

At Electric Forest, a notoriously wild camping festival, my notes are full of surprises. A fellow camper named Bendo took off one morning after he ate a hit of acid and didn't come back until night fell. We didn't worry about him when he went "player one," as we call it, a video game reference. Bendo liked being alone.

He could barely explain what happened when he got back to us. He kept interrupting himself and backtracking and pacing and shaking his head as he spoke.

At Forest, there's an area called The Hangar that's like nothing I've ever seen before at a festival. It's an old airplane hangar built to function like an outdoor shopping mall. There's a craft beer bar, a barber shop, a pin-up girl photo booth, a tattoo parlor (that has the fake tattoos

you probably remember as a child, just add water), an arcade, and a small stage with tables for people who need relief from the heat to rest their feet with a nice, cold beer.

HE

Bendo decided while he was on acid that he wanted a haircut, so he went into the barbershop. The barber did a nice job. Bendo tipped him more than he usually would, in the spirit of the festival. He noticed as a catchy band came on the stage that the barbershop seemed short staffed. No one was sweeping. So Bendo grabbed a broom and went to work, whistling and sweeping and cracking jokes with the employees.

When he put the broom down, a short man came up to him and put a pin on his shirt. It read, "Mile High Club."

"Go to the back of the hangar and you'll find a man in suspenders. Ask him to see Clementine," the man told him. He walked away before Bendo could ask any questions.

Bendo went to the back, where a black curtain hung behind the stage and found a handsome Asian man in suspenders, as he had been told.

"I'm here to see Clementine?" he asked.

"Ah, yes good old Clem," the man said. "I see you have a pin. Follow me."

Bendo was weirded out, but ready to follow along. The man took him through a door labeled "Flower Shop," which led to a hall decorated with Baby's Breath, roses, wood barrels, cobwebs, and vintage framed photographs of people he'd never know. This led to a dark hall that stretched nearly a quarter of a mile, by his measurements.

When they got to the end of it, there was a hostess stand with a bell. The man tapped the bell to make it ring.

"Enjoy," he said.

ME

We're always on our feet at these festivals, so I rarely find the time to seek out the surprises that might be hiding in the dark corners. There are always a few. Mostly, we're walking, *quickly, quickly,* holding on to each other's backpacks and hands as we pass through frenzied crowds of eyeballs and curling mouths. I have touched a thousand arm hairs as I've passed through these crowds. I have absorbed a thousand drops of sweat. I have stepped on a thousand feet. *Careful, careful,* I'm always telling the person in front of me as they drag me through the maze of bodies wrapped in tie dye and smelling of herb and alcohol. I don't mean to step on anyone's toes, but metaphorically I think that's what we're all actually here to do.

There's a sense of urgency that everyone carries with them at these festivals. To miss a set could potentially mean missing the set of a lifetime. It doesn't matter how unknown the artist is—there's a chance it could be the best set of your life. This is sometimes influenced by how high you are, but it's also influenced by experience. To admire and see only the headliners, the big names in the biggest fonts on the top of the highly anticipated festival lineups, is to miss out on an underworld of madness. It's to be an amateur festival-goer. The big shows are wild, especially the electronic kind. But the small shows. That's where a lot of the magic happens.

That's where my friend Nina accidentally smokes PCP when a stranger passes her a bowl that she thinks is cannabis, and finds a live painter who lets her take over the brush and go to crazy with the strokes. The painting is indecipherable when it's done, but when we get home, I help her hang it on her wall. That's where I kiss someone I shouldn't have, a boy with dark hair and large lips, as the crowd shrouds us from any friends seeing. Eventually, we will be together,

and then we will break up. It's where I learn how to hula hoop, because there's actually enough space to move beyond the square foot you get in the large crowds. I will gain a new respect for the hoop girls who can do tricks with arms and legs and with more than one hoop at a time after only a couple of minutes of hula hooping and getting out of breath. It's where I meet a girl named Ang who steals my cigarettes right out of my hand and disappears so fast that I can't tell you is who or which is what or up from down. She was so nice, Ang, until she asked me to hold her drink and I held out the hand with the cigarette pack and that little bitch just took the pack right out of my hand. Whether it was intentional or simply convenience and a game time decision, I'll never know. It's where I find a producer from Baghdad named Motez bumping house music so good that I don't stop listening to house music for months after the festival. It's actually the only music I can listen to for weeks, as I urge the feeling of freedom under the night sky to come back to me while I dance around my small white-tiled kitchen with socked feet. It's where I look up at the trees when I feel a fleeting breeze and say *Am I full? Or am I full of shit?*

HE

A girl in an orange wig and a seductive stewardess outfit came out from behind the curtain to greet Bendo.

"And whom do I have the pleasure of speaking with, Sugar?" she asked as she hiked up her skirt and lifted his arms to pat him down. Her touch was light. She rubbed her hands down his sides. Her fingers grazed his front zipper.

"Bendo?" he told her in a squeak that sounded like a question.

"Well, Mister Bendo," she said in a Mad Men-esque voice. "Seems like you're all clean. But just let me know if you want to get dirty."

She winked, then threw the curtains open and led him through to a speakeasy bar, where bartenders with curled mustaches and bellboy hats promptly moved to take his order. He ordered a specialty cocktail mixed with elderflower as Clementine fawned over him.

"Now Mister Bendo," she cooed in his ear, "this here is a top secret club that only a select few get into for doing good deeds around the park. You aren't going to tell anyone now are you?"

Bendo looked at Clementine's mouth, her gaping smile, and smiled back. He liked secrets.

"I won't tell a soul," he said.

ME

At 27, I'm just not what I used to be. I'm someone who I never was before and someone I will never be again. The sleeplessness I abide by at camp follows me around when I get home to my apartment, 850 square feet in a world that has a circumference of 24,901 miles. I think about how I am so small. But I am so fast at festivals. How I am *moving, moving* through these crowds. How my eyes only half-close when I settle into my memory foam mattress at home, so different from the worn, navy blue sleeping bag that I have trained myself to pass out in at will at camp.

In my dreams, I will be Baby Bird. I will keep moving. I won't stop. If I stop I'll have time to think. If I think, I will think about my fullness, how my mind never matches my festival belly, full of beer and spring rolls and someone's leftover slice of pizza. If I think about my fullness, I will think about my emptiness and what I can fill it with. Awakened moments. Conversation. Song. Laughter. Love. The Intangible Everythings. If I think about what I can fill myself with, though, I will forget to enjoy those things. I'm not even sure I take the time to enjoy

them as is, always running, always taking notes, always try to catch up, never trying to slow down. And if I don't enjoy them, what is the point of all this?

WE

Bendo brings me to the secret joint the next day. Clementine greets us.

"Now Mister Bendo, I see you have a guest," she says. She slaps his hand playfully. "You bad boy, you. Honey, I'm going to have to pat you down."

Clementine does more than pat me down. She rubs her hands over the sides of my breasts and over my inner thighs. When she gets to my back, she grabs my butt cheeks firmly in her hands.

"My, my," she says. I'm speechless and confused, not to mention drunk.

Inside are velvet couches and rickety vintage tables with clawed feet and lacquered tops. A chalk board has a list of custom cocktails. I order the drink with elderflower. Bendo and I clink our glasses together and take a seat. A man in saddle shoes starts playing an old, brown piano behind us. I'm incredulous.

"They must have been here for months," I say to Bendo. Girls in gray stewardess outfits swarm around us. They sit on our laps, rub our shoulders, ask us where we're from and who we're here to see. They stay in their roles perfectly, curling their hair with their fingers and winking and playing with their stockings. We play along, laughing with them and kissing the backs of their hands. I realize it's the first time I've actually sat down in days.

"When do you want to leave?" I ask Bendo after I finish my drink.

He looks at me, bemused.

"Slow down," he says. "Enjoy something for once. How many sets have you seen? How many sets are you going to see? Just chill out for a second. Do something you'll remember."

I'm struck by how right he is. How many sets *have* I seen? Hundreds, for sure. How many do I remember? I would have to go back through every ticket I've bought and every wristband I've worn, read through all the lineups to figure out who I made it to, and even then I'm sure I'd be off.

We stay for a few hours, making friends with the bartenders and nodding smugly at the other people who walked in, other good-doers who know our big secret. Bendo drinks tequila casually, so he doesn't get nearly as drunk as I do while we sit on the rustic stools and flirt with the stewardesses. His shoes are off; he sits on the couches as if he's in his own home. The staff eats it up, dancing around him and lifting their skirts to show off their fishnet tights and garters. Bendo loves the attention. I realize watching him, he doesn't even need me there to enjoy himself. He knows how to fill his time by himself just fine.

ME

When we kiss the girls goodbye and find our group in the crowd, I will feel rejuvenated by this surprise, by the careful production and execution of this fake world that took us back to days passed. I will squeeze the hand in mine that's pulling me forward with all my might. I will step one foot in front of the other to the beat of the bass. I will throw my head back and howl as we make it to a clearing. Everyone will join. I will look at their eyes as moonlight strikes them. I will scream at them, *We'll sleep when we're dead.* The howls will echo and grow and bounce between trees, and be picked up by strangers who fill the air with their own animal sounds. *Fill, fill, fill*

THE TRUTH ABOUT NOW

The funny thing about cocaine is there's never enough. No matter how hard you try to buy the right amount, you're always off.

A gram costs $50 to $60 depending on which dealer you get it from. A large paperclip weighs about a gram. You think about this as you count your cash. This time a gram is $60. You are paying $60 for a paperclip, you think.

"Two," you say. Two grams is more than you bought last time and it should last your eight friends through the night.

But you're wrong. Again. It lasts about three hours. You snort a little off of your friend's glittery nail. The nail is long and fake and sometimes when she's high she clicks the tips together and doesn't realize it and you have to tell her to stop.

She's doing it right now, sitting next to you, sulking into a red solo cup with watery eyes from a massive bong hit that had her blowing smoke out of her nose and mouth at the same time. A real ripper. You're at your house, at what you keep calling the last party of the summer.

"Stop," you tell her.

"Stop," she says back to you. You're not totally sure what she's talking about.

You do, though, think about stopping. But booze has gotten so boring over the last few years. Being drunk is a drag. You're sloppy and sad when you're drunk. Everyone is. But when you're high, you're a spiritual leader. You are enlightened. You are practically clairvoyant. You will teach yourself how to play the ukulele. You will read more poetry. You will create a mathematical equation, later, tomorrow, when you're not high. You are a sayer of things you will do. You will change the world. You will, after you stop.

“This is the last time,” you say to everybody.

“Yeah,” everybody agrees with you. “The last time.”

People are swimming. They have been swimming all night under cafe lights and a moonless sky. They are mostly naked. They are all on LSD.

“I feel like I’m in a womb,” someone in the pool says. Everyone agrees.

You decided mid-summer, as a festival family, that you’re all going to take a break from the music scene. You’ve been to a show a week since the year started, not to mention four festivals.

“We’ll just keep the party at home,” you had suggested, “but we can still party.” Everyone was going broke, so everyone was agreeable.

The day you said “no more shows,” your house became a makeshift camp. The boys moved the couches were moved in a horseshoe shape so there was more space for beer pong. Someone hung sheets from the ceiling to create the illusion of a tent. I painted everyone’s faces. We broke picture frames and tables. The neighbors called the cops. You never answered the door. You were a human giveaway that there were drugs in the house, in your giant fur coat and white dots dashed around your eyebrows. When the police come, you simply hide on the patio and chain-smoke. The weather isn’t cool enough for your coat, so you would look strange answering the door in it, but wearing it feels necessary for pretending you’re somewhere else.

It rains hard that night, so hard that you can barely see them in the pool from the patio a few feet away, but you can hear them laughing, hysterically sometimes. You don’t worry about missing a joke because they’ll all be forgotten, anyway.

“What was I saying?” says the person next to you.

"I'm not sure," you say honestly.

You're having the time of your life every weekend. You really are. You make new friends constantly, big, huge groups of friends who like to do what you like to do. They like music, all music, electronic music, rock music, rap music, alternative music. They like to go see all of this music. They like to party, hard, when they see music. They dance a lot, like you. They dance with reckless abandon, like you. You like all of them. You like everybody. And everybody likes you, or at least you really hope so.

The pool is filled with floats. Donuts, a dinosaur, a whale, a floating beer pong table. It's absurd and wonderful. Your friends get great joy out of trying to ride the whale, which is overinflated and difficult to sit on for longer than a minute. They take turns trying.

"We are adults," you say to them, an accusation.

"We sure are," they say back as they continue to grapple with the slippery plastic sea monster.

Adulthood isn't what you thought it would be. You always looked at adulthood as your parents' adulthood. Marriage, mortgage, misery. But no. Your adulthood is a special kind of adulthood. It's a millennial adulthood with an internet sense of humor. Every day is Sunday Funday. Every day is brunch. Every day is mimosas. Every day is shots of Fireball. Every day is a cigarette. Every day is a party.

Every day is exhausting.

"I fucking love you," you say to everybody.

"I fucking love you," everybody says back.

You live with three boys, one of whom is B. It is both as easy and as difficult as it sounds.

Boys are messy. Boys are moody. But boys say things out loud, and so issues and arguments about whose dirty socks were left on the couch or the pizza box that's been on the counter for a week are squashed in seconds. You prefer living with these boys. You've lived in nine different houses in the last eight years, and always with girls. You've lived with an array of different kinds of girls. A pretty hippie, a skinny bulimic, a jaded stoner, a punk, a cheerleader, an aspiring lawyer, an alcoholic. You have shared everything from ribbons to razors with these girls. You have fought over dishes and directions with these girls. You have always had to act like a girl because of these girls, with your makeup and your hair ties and bobby pins and magazines and face masks and *Sex and the City* reruns. But all of that changed when you moved in with the boys.

It's a brotherhood, a frat boy lifestyle, but your gender doesn't matter here. They don't ask you who you are or what you do. They ask you: "Can you keep up?" And you can. And you will.

You burp out loud now. You drink often and without regard for the next day. You find glory in injuries. You watch every football game. You curse unabashedly. You don't expect them to buy you drinks—if anything, you buy the next round of whiskey at the bar. You have given up on wearing pants around the house. You FaceTime all their moms. You flick off people in traffic. You let them talk about having sex with random women in front of you and don't flinch at the various names they have for buttholes when they explicitly talk about anal—dirt barn, turd cutter, shit box, balloon knot, chocolate starfish, rusty sheriffs badge. You find no shame in housing a Quarter Pounder with Cheese. You buy more cocaine.

You do another bump. You think about the gram of coke as a gram of sugar. Sometimes, it's sweet in its own chemical way. You think about the fact that there are thirty-nine grams of

sugar in a can of Pepsi. You were drinking a can of Pepsi when you realized this. You knew what the physical embodiment of a gram of white powder looked like from buying coke. You imagined thirty-nine bags of coke each weighed at a gram, then thirty-nine bags of sugar each weighed at a gram. They would look exactly the same. You imagined pouring them all into a can. Then you realized that's what soda was. Thirty. Nine. Grams. In. One. Can.

You threw away the Pepsi, and stopped buying soda for that day on. But you kept buying coke.

Of all the people you buy drugs from, you always find the cocaine dealers to be the sketchiest, and the itchiest. You like the guys who sell mushrooms the best. They are long-haired, soft voiced. They have trippy posters in their bedrooms. They have delivery jobs, your favorite of which was the guy who worked for Edible Arrangements. One time you went to buy some straight from work at your job as an editor, and you showed up at the dealer's house in dress pants and high heels. He was confused when he opened the door. You didn't look like the type of person who buys mushrooms in that outfit. When you got inside, he offered you a bong hit and asked you what you did for a living. He'd never thought to ask before because he'd never seen you in work wear. You sat in his room on the edge of his bed, surrounded by arrangements of cantaloupe cut into hearts and honeydew pressed into stars and strawberries dipped in chocolate.

You ripped the bong and tried to blow the smoke away from the fruit. "I'm a writer."

"That's rad," he said.

"Sorry you had to see me like this," you said, and gesture to your pants.

"The masks we wear," he said as he weighed the mushrooms.

When you got up to leave, he plucked a chocolate covered strawberry off of the long toothpick that anchored it to a ball of Styrofoam hidden in the basket.

"They'll never know," he said.

Your friend has stopped clicking her nails. Everyone has come in from the pool to chain-smoke on the patio. The rain has slowed to a drizzle, and the frogs in the backyard are as loud as car engines. You are all fascinated by the frogs. They sound like they're surrounding the house, but you have yet to see any. You decide you are going to look for one. When you get up, the patio door clicks behind you. The frogs go silent. They heard you coming. Their silence is deafening.

"Sorry," you say to the frogs.

You go back to the patio. You realize you are absolutely hammered.

But you didn't take any LSD, not this time. You're not quite ready to do acid again. The last time you took it, nearly a year ago, you were in the woods at a bluegrass festival just north of Gainesville. That last night of the festival it was thirty-nine degrees out and you got lost trying to find your tent. Every tent looks the same in the dark. Every tree, every road looks the same in the dark. You got separated from your friends at a drum circle, where you met a sweet girl from Georgia who worked as a beekeeper. You talked to her until the fire was put out, and then realized you were alone. You found out the next day that your boyfriend also got lost looking for the tent, but found himself another fire and a new group of campers to sit with while he tried to regain a sense of direction.

The leader of that group of campers called himself French Toast. He was wearing nothing but harem pants with small mirrors sewn on them and a fur coat. He took a liking to your

boyfriend, and offered him deemers, which your boyfriend mistook for meaning dabs, concentrated doses of cannabis that are packed in oil and typically smoked with a small blowtorch. But deemers is, in fact, DMT. So while your boyfriend was accidentally smoking DMT, otherwise known as the Spirit Molecule, a psychedelic compound that many people identify as God-like, or end-of-life-like, with a stranger named French Toast, you were lost and alone and tripping on acid in a dark forest.

Later, he told you it felt like a dark tunnel that vibrated when he blinked. You told him that's actually how it felt when you were looking for your tent and when you did after what felt like a year, truly, a lifetime even, there was a stranger in it.

"I'm so sorry," the stranger said. "I got lost and it's so cold. I'm still lost."

"It's ok," you said to the stranger. You understood. You got in the tent and zipped yourself into your sleeping bag. You and the stranger fell asleep together. The stranger was gone when you woke up. And then you were suddenly unsure there was ever a stranger at all.

You're just not quite ready to do LSD again.

The rain is gone, but a night breeze makes the pool water ripple and shake. Or maybe it's just your eyes. The soles of your feet are soft and wet. You dance them into the house. You put on disco music and turn on a lamp that you drunkenly bought on Amazon 1-Click on your iPhone during another night quite like this one. The bulb rotates and flashes colors. Red, pink, blue, green, purple. It's a cheap thrill. It sets the mood. Watching your friends dancing and smoking cigarettes in the house, you realize it's the best seventeen bucks you ever spent. You dance with them until the sky turns the softest shade of gray. The sun is rising. There are empty beer cans on every surface inside the house. All the cocaine and vodka is gone. Someone is

spooning your black and white dog on the couch. Someone is sitting on the patio, alone. Someone else is sleeping under the coffee table.

You survey the scene and feel the same burst of pride you feel every time you throw a house party in place of a festival. How you miss waking up in green grass, how you wish the big stages and the loud crowds and the never-ending nights that turn the yellow shade of morning in the time it takes to flick a done cigarette, and how much you think about the smaller crowds at the local venues that manage to throw the best party you've been to every time you go out and mingle amongst the other local fest freaks just waiting for the next big thing to come to Florida, but damn do you have a good time at home.

You live for this. You are a spiritual leader. You are enlightened. You are practically fucking clairvoyant. You will take up jogging again. You will eat more organic produce. You will create something, a painting, a poem, a quilt even, later, tomorrow, when you're not high. You are a sayer of things you will do. You will change the world.

You will, after you stop.

THE LAST TIME WE LEFT

Our dog is good in the car for hours at a time, snuggling and snoring against the backseat. He sprawls out on his back with white legs stretched like a yogi in split, neck bent at an unreasonable angle while his tongue lolls, red and wet, out of his black rimmed mouth. He's a lovely mutt with a coat like a bride's dress, snug and milky and sweet. He is the closest thing we have to a child.

The road taking us out of Florida turns orange when the sun starts to set and the light becomes a brilliant shade of Georgia peach, the fruit of a place we'll pass through on the way to North Carolina. Everything feels kind of right for once—fingers entwined like vines and resting on the shifter, dog grunting contently against the rise and fall of the road, random radio station playing classic rock music, Fleetwood Mac, a drifter's soundtrack that makes us feel as young as we are.

We left Orlando in the late afternoon, hungry and confused by each other. We didn't talk about it. We'd done enough of that. We'd done enough of the, "Why are you like this?" Me, flighty, jaded, always trying to get away in the last couple years of our five year relationship. Always buying tickets to festivals without asking if anyone else wants to go, always trying to be alone with other people, particularly strangers, always interested in someone else's story besides my own. B stuck in his ways, so stuck in the rental house, in the car, in the job that he said he wouldn't leave for me when I wanted to take off forever and he just wanted to slow down, settle down into the life that everyone around had started to live in their late twenties. It's a life that I'm terrified of, with a big wedding and a loan for a home and a fat, screaming newborn on my hip. It's a life I'm not sure I'll ever desire or be ready for.

I made sure we'd have snacks in the car, dried fruit and kettle chips and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches that I made with the precision of a swordsman, but we're both the kind of hungry that only meat will satisfy when we hit Georgia, and we stop a gas station with a diner attached. I sit on the hood of the car to scarf down a cheeseburger, less a lady than ever as I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and let ketchup drip onto my shirt. I stopped caring what he thought of me years ago, this man, who saw me get too fucked up and cry over my own mediocrity with tribal designs painted black on my face at the second festival we ever attended together in the infancy of our budding relationship, Dancegiving in our hometown of Fort Lauderdale, who saw me just about pee my pants standing in line for a porta potty after I snorted too much shitty coke at a dubstep set in the middle of the woods, who saw me retch in front of his toilet after drinking too much beer after many of his college hockey parties. This is the life we used to live when we were kids, and we said we'd grow out of when he got his big boy job as an engineer, before I started working for corporate America as a copywriter. Before we started putting on Pants and Shirts and Shoes.

The festival antics didn't actually stop after we got jobs. If anything, our need to go to festivals increased after we earned a little money. We didn't have to travel as broke college kids anymore. We could go as semi-adults, with semi-amounts of money semi-saved in our bank accounts. We could do so much with two of us. We split the supplies, the canopy and the lights and the firewood. We split the hotel, when needed, and the rental car. We split the drugs. Maybe we flipped what was leftover and put the money toward more of what we just sold. Maybe we saved a little in between. Maybe we didn't. Maybe things got a little out of control.

I want a beer, now. We grab a six-pack of Stella, one of his favorites, from the gas station for the road. The dog can tell we're not in Florida anymore when we walk with him to stretch our legs. He nearly runs himself ragged, dragging B behind him, both of them bound by the leash. His tail is straight as an arrow—that's the Pointer in him, I think—when he walks up to trees and bushes. He sniffs long careful snorts that make him even more delirious with what I suppose is happiness.

I roll the back windows down for him when we return to the car and crack open our first beers. He's manic in the backseat, running back and forth between the windows, desperate and greedy for all the new wonderful woody smells that line the road.

We're on this trip because we've agreed to take a break from the festivals. My obsession with living a nomadic life caused a rift when B disappeared for three days without telling me where he was going. My own fault, really, always daring him to stop caring what people think and telling him to worry less about his job. He called me from JFK after a festival called Electric Zoo on Randall's Island, delirious with comedown. He told me everyone in New York was just a rat drinking Starbucks. He told me maybe I was right, maybe we were just specks of stardust an unanswered questions, things I had said to him on my bad days. He asked me if I realized how small we must look to the moon.

"Remember that night on the beach?" he asked. "The moon couldn't even see us."

"I can see you," I told him. "Please come home."

When festival season ended near the end of summer, we would plan staycations in neighboring cities just to feel like we were out of town. One particular day, we decided we wanted to eat hydroponic mushrooms on Cocoa Beach. We drove forty minutes to the coast and

rented out a room for $40 a night. In the lobby, a black woman with tired eyes smoked a cigarette and scratched her stretchy belly.

"The rooms are *reeeal* nice," she said with a Floridian drawl as she handed us a metal key.

The moon was so bright that we could see our shadows, gray hieroglyphics in the sand. We parachuted a tapestry colored with dark swirls over a smooth dune and watched it settle. We lay on our backs, smoking cigarettes and talking to the moon. We asked it if we mattered.

"I think we matter," B said confidently when the moon didn't respond. It seemed to glow brighter.

We calculated that it would take about a year to get to the shining white orb of the moon from the Earth. Who would we take with us if we had to be launched there? We went through all of our friends and family. No, we agreed, we could not be on a spaceship with our Italian mothers for a whole year. Even our best friends would get old and tired. That left only us, alone, on our rocket to Earth's satellite. I turned on Led Zeppelin.

"We're moon friends," I said as "Stairway to Heaven" tried to compete with the lapping waves.

When we got back, I googled how long it takes to the moon while B showered. Only four days.

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Before we started messing around with mushrooms and LSD, I was already going through various existential crises, questioning if my life meant anything at all, if all of the poems I wrote about B meant anything at all, if anything I ever contributed to the art world through

submissions to magazines and literary journals and websites would mean someone would remember me. I had only heard of LSD's effects—how it opened the mind, how it embraced any circumstance, how it made people think and question everything they knew. I just didn't realize how far it would take us in our search for identity. It was after a bad, careless trip that I decided I wanted to know the history of LSD, which was first used for intentional conscience expansion in 1943, when it was discovered by a Swiss chemist named Dr. Albert Hoffmann. At the same time that the CIA started using LSD to coax confessions out of unwilling war informants, psychiatrists were using it in psychotherapy. They found that even the most diminutive dose brought the subconscious forward to the conscious. In my fever to become an educated LSD-taker who could use the drug lucidly, I went as far as to buy a book called *Smoke Signals*, in which author Martin A. Lee writes that LSD illuminates the "long-hidden sources of stress by bringing to the surface whatever might be lurking in the depths of the mind; hence the word psychedelic, which literally means 'mind manifesting.'"

My first mind-expanding realization actually happened during that bad trip: I realized in an instant that my death would be insignificant, as a result of all deaths being insignificant. I was in Miami at a short two-day festival called Basslights. Dubstep pounded from a stage with screens that flashed images of three-eyed calico cats, a red-headed boy falling into space, the words "I do what I wanna do, I do what I like." I took a single dose and found myself paralyzed in the grass. I looked between the sky and B, who was prone next to me, back and forth, until he asked me what I was thinking as rave girls danced around us in furry boots and sparkly bras.

"We're all just dying," I said.

"Don't be morbid," he said

But I just knew. I still know. Once you realize how little you mean, you try really hard to mean something, to find significance. I found significance in music, in movement and dance, in using my body, in bending my joints and stomping my feet. I tried to express this to B again as we were leaving, that I felt significant at these festivals. I felt like I was part of a like-minded community that also made me feel like I mattered. All he said was he needed a shower. We went back to our hotel room, with its white walls and white sheets, and I listened to the water run in the bathroom as I tried to gather my thoughts, telling myself the fluffy white pillow was not a delicious marshmallow.

When he came out, he sat on the bed next to me with hair dripping and towel wrapped around his waist and said, "At least we're dying together."

It was the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me.

We became addicted to the adrenaline travel gave us after our life thoughts aligned, packing our hiking packs and running from plane to plane, off to New York, then to California, then to Seattle, then to Tennessee, to South Florida, to Dallas. Home was where we traveled to. Home was each other, until it wasn't anymore.

***

When we get to the bottom of Beech Mountain in North Carolina, the steep roads up to his family cabin are so icy that I can't look out the window. I close my eyes and recall being terrified of escalators as a child, how the ride up seemed almost decelerated, how the grinding metal inside the handrail had taken the fingers of a friend playing a game with imaginary people, but B tells me we're here, we're safe, we're fine. The mention that *we*, together, are fine, rings in my ears.

We make love on a plaid couch the colors of winter, light blue and forest green and white as soon as we get into the cabin. The house is a big rustic thing with the charm of a cabin. The dog is overjoyed by the staircase, running his wonderful legs up and down until he hyperventilates, drooling, and crashes to the floor beside us.

And when he did, we left again, but this time together, to get away from the emptiness we felt in our house, the house we always came back to after we escaped to festivals and tried our best to feel something like alive.

We untangle ourselves and slide to the floor to pet our dog's pink belly. He lifts his legs and rolls his eyes as I assert a good scratch. I mold myself to him, extend my arms around him as far as I can, while B leans into my back with his chest, breathes me in, and says *let's start over, now*, even though I sense an end is near.

FORGET ABOUT IT

When I sat down to write this in 2016, I tried to first write down the name of every festival I've ever been to, only to realize my memory has gone to shit. I can barely remember what I've eaten for breakfast by lunch, if I've eaten anything at all. When coworkers ask me what I did last weekend I say one of three things: Relaxed, chilled out, or laid low. I don't use these variations because I'm blowing them off; it's because I need more than ten seconds to figure out exactly what it is that I did, and most often when I figure out what I did the time to share has passed, or it's too inappropriate to share with a coworker.

Moonrise Festival is coming up in a few days, always in early August, and I'm thinking a lot about how it will feel to dance to loud music again. I crave the movement, the feel of the subwoofers. I like it when it's so loud that I can feel my organs shifting around. Those organs include a twenty-foot small intestine that is digesting something I can never remember.

I couldn't tell you if my memory problems are from smoking marijuana for so long, on and off for about seven years, or if it's just me. I've been absent minded my whole life. I'm the person who spends half an hour looking for an iPhone that's in my pocket. I'm the person who puts a hook by their front door and never remembers to hang the key on it. The person who borrows a pen from you, a fine tip one with black ink, maybe even your favorite, and forgets to give it back, and then probably loses if because I forgot where I put it. The person who buys and fills out a birthday card for you, but never sends it. The person who leaves a sweet potato in the oven for ten hours. Bakes it for dinner and goes to bed without realizing I haven't served it as part of my meal. Falls asleep and wakes up to a hot house and a sad, shriveled yam melted between the grates.

Once I wrote a long, loving note for a friend in their birthday card, and then failed to send the card. It sat in a drawer for three years, and every year I would tell myself, "I'll send it out this year." The message inside remained relevant for two of those years, though I couldn't tell you what I wrote in it anymore. And then we weren't all that close of friends that third year, so when the birthday came around I couldn't tell myself I would "do it this year." The card went in the trash, which I likely forgot to take out.

Anyway, the festival is coming up in four days. I'm flying to Baltimore. I'll be there Friday through Sunday. This festival is nothing special in the sense of production. The stages are large and impressive, and hell they're loud, but there are no big surprises, no characters, no hidden chambers or strange episodes waiting to happen at camp, because we have to stay in a hotel. The festival takes place on the grounds of Pimlico Racecourse, which is not camp friendly.

I'm escaping this time, for sure. I know I said I was taking a break from festivals, but I just need to get out of here, clear my head. I just ended a five-year relationship with B. Five years. Five years. And I can't even remember quite why I stayed for that long.

***

I forgot I was writing this. I just got back from Moonrise in Baltimore and was looking over my desktop to figure out what I was last working on, and here it is. This was the second time I've been to Moonrise. It wasn't all that special—looks like I said this before—maybe not even worth the trip. Not all festivals are, but you won't learn that until you try, and I'll try anything once, twice if I like it. My relationship with the four people I went with feels forced, because I met them through B at our house parties. Maybe those are my own insecurities,

though, wondering if I actually mean anything to them or if I'm just a lost girl they're willing to entertain for a weekend to be polite.

They did invite me, back in February of 2016, months before the festival happened in August. Things were different then. B and I were still together. So maybe they invited me in what they felt was a secure space—I was taken by someone they knew, we had all been friends for about five years, and we had been to this festival together last year, with the exception of my ex, who had to work—but were too polite to back out after my breakup, seeing as we already had tickets. I don't know. I'm not really sure who my friends are anymore.

When you're together for five years, you share everything. House, cars, kitchen, dog, friends, Festival Family. Some friends feel like they have to take sides, and which one of you they choose becomes obvious quickly. Others try to maintain a delicate balance, spending time with one of us and then the other separately. Some completely fall off, because they are a couple, and some couples only hang out with couples. (Singles make the more pretentious couples sad.) And some agonize over how to keep the Festival Family together when it feels like everything is falling apart. When you've traveled all over the country together many times, who do you travel with after a breakup, especially if the couple that has broken up doesn't want to be near each other?

The really interesting thing about Festival Families is once you fest together, you are bonded forever, or so it feels. It's an illusion that time breaks down. I have had many a Festival Family stay together and fall apart. Some people grow out of the scene and abandon it. Some have a bad family experience and leave the family, but not the scene. Some people stumble along new families on the way. Some physically move from away from the Festival Family, which

tends to form in the same city and creates a home base, and have to find new families, with the hope that the old family will eventually visit, which is likely but not often.

But the Festival Families that stay together are quite similar to a nuclear American family. With every Festival Family I've been part of, and I've been part of seven in the last six years, there are older fest-goers and younger fest goers, matriarchs and patriarchs. Some of those families shared members. We cooked and cleaned camp for each other. We shared our food and clothes. We made small communities with our canopies. We woke up in the morning, unzipped our tents, came out to stretch, and joked with our neighbors. When it was time for music, and we went in past the silver gates and wristband machines that we swiped our wrists against so the festivals could calculate how many people were going in per day, we did our best to stay together, leashed by hand holds or entwined pinky fingers, like parents to children at Disneyworld. We took what we learned at home and brought it to those campsites. And for many people who didn't have a nuclear family, who had parents who divorced or who never had siblings, or maybe grew up in a bad way, the Festival Family became their life, before, during, and after the festival.

The emergence of the iPhone group chat changed our ability to communicate about festivals. Instead of having side conversations that we had to report to each other one by one, or meet about in person, or creating Facebook groups that could potentially be flagged, Apple made it possible for Festival Families to stay together every second of every day, even while not at a festival. The text messages can be overwhelming. Before I left all the phone group chats after the breakup—I didn't want to see B's name every day—I would often check my phone at work at the end of the day and miss up to a hundred messages. I never remembered what the first

message was, then missed all the ones in between, then didn't have the patience to scroll back up to figure out what was going on. Everyone's always trying to plan the next event, the next festival. While my Moonrise family only consists of five people, my Electric Forest Family consists of thirteen. And beyond that, my Hulaween family consists of around twenty five. And the planning is extensive. Tents, stakes, hammers, canopies, batteries, rope, chairs, tables, tapestries, food, water, alcohol, weed, glow sticks, costumes. Who has this? Who has that? Where did those go? It's a never ending rabbit hole of necessities.

But the conversations are not always planning related. There is constant sharing of links to new music; festival lineup predictions; hours of listing inside jokes; someone asking if anyone has seen their pants or their favorite lighter, it was their dad's; recipe suggestions; camping tips; screenshots of conversations on Reddit of festival headline rumors; pictures of our dogs; pictures of us with our dogs; pictures with dogs we wish were our dogs; conversations about how we should probably not get any more dogs because we travel so often to festivals and finding a knowledgeable pup sitter is already a pain. The list goes on.

To be in a Festival Family is to be saturated with friendship, with communication. I think I can say with certainty, from what I've observed, that people who do not like people do not go to festivals. My more introverted friends say the crowds seem too suffocating and intimidating. So what you end up with at a festival is thousands of people who just want to talk and hang out talking and hanging out together. At camping festivals nearly every second of every day is loud, until people start to go down around three o'clock in the morning. And even then there are still RV camps that rage until the sun comes up, or drum circles that never end, or lost souls who didn't memorize the path back to their camp and walk from site to site asking if *anyone has*

maybe seen a flag with a pirate skull on it, it was right next to my tent, I know it, to which the campers likely say, *sorry Charlie, but aren't there like a hundred of those around here?* Then that lost person will likely get offered a place to sleep, the back of a truck, adopted, and a new Festival Family has been born.

***

I forgot when I started writing this that I was writing about how I forget things. It just clicked. It happens that fast. I couldn't tell you if it's from smoking marijuana or if it's just me. I've read time and time again that marijuana is linked to memory loss. I smoke weed nearly every day now, mostly because I've struggled with insomnia my entire life, but also because it soothes me.

I was a bad kid when it came to sleep. Probably the worst. I would leave my bed when all the lights went out and crawl into my parents' closet to set up camp when I was finally old enough to walk. My mom claims I figured out how to pull myself up as an infant in my crib. Then, I took my first step trying to get out of it. It wasn't so much that I didn't want to sleep, a psychologist told them when I was seven, it was that I didn't want to be alone.

A universal personality trait of the people who go to festivals is that they all experience severe FOMO (fear of missing out). I experience it constantly. It wasn't until a year ago, in 2015, that I realized the damage I was doing to my body by never letting it rest. And even now I have trouble saying no to plans. I liken the feeling to being a high school girl who isn't allowed out, the anxiety she would get knowing all of her girlfriends are getting together without her and will subsequently have *something* to say about her and will say it while she's not around, because, as

a high school girl, she knows this is what high school girls do. This is from the perspective of what I believe is every high school girl ever, including me.

Now apply that anxiety to having fun. It can be all-consuming. Your Festival Family is your "family" because you've had most of the best times of your life with them. My friend Allison, FOMO queen and fellow Hulaween camper, describes it as knowing what level of fun you have with certain people, and no matter what kind of fun it is, you imagine it all as the "best fun" because you know that, no matter what, you always have fun with those people. So you convince yourself if you don't go, you'll miss something important, and then the definition of important becomes muddled because getting up for work is important, but is getting up for work as important as painting you face and eating moonshine cherries and laughing under the white light of the moon with the people you love most in this world?

In accordance with the creation of group chat, photo and video apps like Snapchat and Instagram also link us endlessly. This is a primary source of FOMO. I have all the apps, and I can't help but check how the thing my friends are at without me is going. And they are always posting about it, because another thing about having the best fun is everyone always wants everyone else to know they are having the best fun, because the best fun is only worth having if someone knows you're having it. Social media has made us all into actors and food experts, posting our pouty faces and big smiles, or our glass of champagne next to a plate of charcuterie on Sunday Funday. We can't pronounce the names of the cheese, but doesn't it look pretty? Aren't we pretty? And aren't we only somebody when everybody can see us?

***

I forgot that I wanted to write about what marijuana is said to do to your memory. I went to the grocery store and thought a lot about why I might forget things, and forgot that I think marijuana is a pretty big part of it. I got orange juice at the store. I forget where I read this, but I saw once that orange juice is good for your memory.

Another article I read in *Washington Post* titled "What Happens When You Get Stoned Every Single Day for Five Years"—*how appropriate,* I thought—says, "If you smoke a lot of weed—like a *lot* of it—it can potentially do permanent damage to your short-term memory." The article goes on to say a professor named Reto Auer from the University of Lausanne put together a team that examined the marijuana habits of 3,400 Americans over the span of twenty-five years. When it was over, those people took tests developed to assess cognitive abilities like memory, focus, and making snap decisions. They found that people who smoked weed every day for a long period of time, here meaning five years or more, had "poorer verbal memory in middle age than people who didn't smoke, or who smoked less." This remained true even after the team evaluated other factors like age, education, use of other substances and depression, which are known to affect cognitive abilities. This was reported in February of 2016.

When I first started smoking weed, it was a social activity with my all of college roommates. We would smoke blunts or joints and watch TV, lazily ordering food or rushing to class or forgetting to do either. Later, when I met my current ex, B, and the ex before him, Palmer, it became an intimate activity. It was something we bonded over and enjoyed together. It made us happy and sleepy. But now, I smoke alone, a small puff before bed at minimum to settle me in, and also with friends, and also with lovers, and also at festivals. It's infiltrated almost every aspect of my life and every friend group I've found myself in, which I think speaks a lot to

the amount of people who recreationally smoke weed. In truth, I don't know many people in Florida, from my hometown or who went to my college or who I hang out with now, who don't.

As someone who has been smoking weed for a long time, I have what I might call standards. I like to smoke both sativa and indica strains, sativa for social settings and indica for sleepy ones, as this is where they individually fare best. There are also hybrids. In Florida, where weed isn't legal, most of the people I buy from in Orlando are getting it in Miami. I don't know where the people in Miami get it. Mostly I'm told it's from California, but who really knows. I recently started ordering from a friend in Colorado who's been willing to ship small amounts to me via USPS, known as the "best drug dealer in the country" on Reddit. It's a sativa strain called Green Crack. It tastes like the earth and makes me both talkative and thoughtful. The body high is mellow and I smile a lot. I've gotten used to it and have had a hard time buying the nameless strains I get in the south. I find the Green Crack very soothing before bed, and that it doesn't totally knock me out when I'm drinking alcohol.

So when I went to Baltimore, I couldn't fly with Green Crack, and I expected my friends to have picked some weed up for the duration of the festival. But I forgot that this particular group doesn't care much for weed, and instead relies on booger sugar (cocaine) to get them up and running, and takes Xanax to go back down. Never tried the prescription stuff. I'd rather stick with something all natural, that comes from the Earth.

"Why didn't you tell us?" they asked when I pulled out my short Tops papers to roll a joint with the weed they didn't have.

"Didn't I?" I asked. I couldn't remember. Even if I hadn't, wouldn't real friends know what I like and think of it for me without my asking?

They all agreed I hadn’t. I shrugged.

“Forget about it,” I told them.

I DON'T WANNA WEAR NO SHOES

"Flat footed," my mother said as she examined the slight curve of my right foot that didn't quite count as an arch. She kneeled in front of me like she was proposing. I stood in front of her, my knee bent in a flamingo position as she turned my foot in her hand. "Your grandpa was flat footed, too. You need to wear good shoes to support you when you walk."

I was ten. "But I don't wanna wear no shoes," I told her. I stomped my bare feet on the white tile in the kitchen hard enough to make slapping sounds that made us both reactively blink. She pulled away and crossed her arms as she stood up.

"Suit yourself," she said. "They'll call you duck feet and someday you'll have to wear expensive special shoes to support your ankles."

But I didn't care if they called me duck feet. I didn't care if I had feet as flat as paper. I didn't care about expensive shoes, some day, or any day. I just cared about how burning hot the sidewalk felt when I walked to the neighbor's house, where there were six other barefoot kids to play with (*Christian family planning*, my mother said to me snidely when I asked why my best friend, Sandy, had so many more sisters and brothers than me), how soft the St. Augustine grass felt when I ran over it to chase a Frisbee that the second oldest, Macky, always threw too far and too long for me, or what the prickle of palm fronds felt like beneath the soles of my skin as I traipsed through the small jungle of my parents' Florida lawn, where palm trees covered the pool and a small grapefruit tree dropped luscious, orange globes in October for me to pick up. My mother would cut them in half, and we would eat them for breakfast with a few packs of Sweet 'n Low sprinkled on top before she would drive me and my little brother to school.

I got in trouble a lot for taking my shoes off in school. I popped them off from the back one at a time using the opposite toes, first my saddle shoes in middle school, then my Mary Jane style Doc Martens in high school, then my leather sandals in college. If I wasn't being told to stop talking so damn much, I was being told to put my shoes back on.

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Nothing's changed. I am a dirty footed woman, walking around my yard to take out the trash or get the mail and bringing the sand and soil on the bottoms of my feet into the house, through the living room and onto the white rug in front of the kitchen sink. I don't even think to wipe them at the front door. Sometimes, I walk to sit on the dusty stoop out front and smoke a cigarette before I go to sleep, my lopsided-eared dog next to me every step, and the two of us take our dirty paws straight into my bed and get under the covers without a single thought about the soot we've brought in.

I'm even worse when I camp at music festivals. I stroll through the woods from campsite to campsite with unprotected feet out for all to see. I've stepped on many an overturned acorn and stubbed my toes on a hundred tree roots camouflaged by dirt. I swear my propensity to swear comes mostly from the minor injuries I collect as I wander and roam to meet campground neighbors or get up from my seat to find papers to roll a joint or grab a beer from the cooler, my bare feet at the mercy of the many ropes and stakes that zig-zag in my path. At this point, I'm sure I've muttered, yowled, and whispered a million "god dammits" in my lifetime.

I love a good "god dammit," I really do. It was my dad's choice of curse when I was growing up. Everything was a "god dammit." A bad putt on the golf course, oil sputtering from a hot pan on the stove and onto his skin, a paper cut, a high electric bill, the cable going out, his

football team losing *or* winning, the phone ringing too long, the internet dial up being too slow, the neighbor mowing the lawn while he was trying to read, or the red-faced Muscovy duck that would sneakily waddle up and poop right on the patio as my dad looked out the kitchen window that faced the backyard. *God dammit, god dammit, god dammit.*

His favorite story to tell about me is one in which he comes home from work cranky, swearing, sweating, and with a temper that just won't quit. In this story, I am small, three maybe four years old, and I waddle to him with sockless baby feet to wrap my arms around his leg. I look up at him, and he looks down at me.

"Daddy," I say, "did you have a god dammit day?"

***

My favorite place in the world to be barefoot is in a grassy field in front of a stage blaring bluegrass music. I love bluegrass. I never heard music like that when I was a kid, the swarming banjos, the plucking fiddle, the standup bass, and the jaw harp all colliding together in the most joyous crescendo. My dad raised me on classic rock and jazz, Black Sabbath and the Rat Pack, Ozzy for his bad days, and Sinatra for all the good ones. He kept anything country out of the house; he had a bad taste for it after he relocated in his twenties from New England to Florida, where country music was more prevalent, only to find out in his thirties that with a good job and a wife and two kids, it's hard to uproot.

He never called Florida home. When we would leave for Connecticut for the long summers that he had off from teaching or for Christmas to see our grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins, who never left the northeast, he would look at us in the airport, giddy, and say, "We're going home, kids."

My little brother and I were never sure how to feel about that, but we knew that going "home" made our daddy happy, so we tried to be happy about it, too. We missed a lot of our best friends' birthdays and parties and graduations upholding this tradition, going "home" every year, two or three times a year, for weeks or even a whole month at a time. And in the wintertime, when I shuffled my bare feet over the warn, warped carpet of my grandparents living room to their back window to watch the snow fall, my grandmother threw fits about how I would get pneumonia if I didn't put on socks. She made me pull them on and all the way up my calves in front of her, and nodded at me with sharply manicured hands perched on her thin knee, satisfied.

"Good girl," she always said.

But at night when I got in a bed dressed in fleece blankets printed with snowmen and pulled the covers over myself, I would slip the socks off, first the right, then the left, and feel a sense of relief as my naked soles smoothed out the fitted sheet at the base of the mattress.

When I look at how much I travel to festivals now, I wonder if it's because I left where I was born so often, torn between my loyalty to Florida and my dad's Connecticut complex—*Florida's too hot, Florida's too humid, Florida's too flat, Florida's too Republican, god dammit*—that I never actually identified anything as home. Since I moved out of my parents' house nine years ago, I've lived in seven houses. I'm not sure anyone would ever say I know how to make a house a home, because maybe I don't.

***

I think I like bluegrass because a lot of it is about heartbreak, hating work, and alcohol, all of which I dabble in frequently. It's pretty gloomy stuff. Women are always leaving, children are always crying, jobs are always killing, and the bottle is always empty. But I also love that it's

a lie, like me, the little copywriter in her little cubicle popping her shoes off under the desk and struggling to shove them back on before meetings, and then fleeing corporate life every weekend so she can join the shoeless festival crowds drunk on cold beer and whiskey, straight, and grain alcohol, dancing in the sun to the sharp vibrations of harmonicas.

Bluegrass is a lie because it's actually green. It just has blue flower buds on it in spring, so when it's season and the buds bloom and take over a field, it takes on the supple color of dark ocean water over light sand. Hence the name.

There's nothing like watching a good bluegrass band go to town with improvisations. The guitar is flat-picked rapidly while the bass is slapped, and the singers come together with their voices to find the highest pitch they can, what is called in bluegrass speak "the high lonesome sound." I first heard this term in the parking lot of a Gold Lion grocery store in Tennessee, where my friends and I stopped before we drove into Bonnaroo. A man so tan he looked like he had visited the sun sat in the back of a pickup truck and diddled on a fiddle, singing off key and with gusto. He was barefoot, and short-legged, his feet hanging just above the gray asphalt. We stopped and dropped our bags of ice and do-see-doed for him, two stepping and catching each other's crooked elbows. When he stopped, he asked us if we knew about Bill Monroe. We didn't.

"The daddy of bluegrass," he said. "Ain't no high lonesome sound like that."

The high lonesome sound is about the saddest and happiest thing I've ever heard. It's the voice of old bluegrass. It's a sound that comes from the back of the throat and the bottom of the gut. It's the sound of a release. I imagine if you heard it without the instruments, it might sound like someone having a really good, wailing cry.

***

I'm one of many who drift around festival camp barefoot. There is no dress code in the woods or in the forest or in the fields. Clothing itself is not even required. I've brushed up against many pastied breasts in the throngs of people at stages. I've seen about every nipple pasty there is. Smiley faces, stars, hearts, marijuana leaves, black Xs, mushrooms, tassles, jack-o-lanterns, crosses (god bless), seashells, flowers, clovers, unicorns, Christmas wreaths. Anything can be a pasty if you want it to be. And that's not the only stripper-wear that comes with the lax form of wardrobe. Many girls who aren't topless flaunt crystalized bras with sharp spikes or colorful designs. Calf-high fur boots are common, too, always in electric colors and fluffy as a Siberian husky. Sometimes, when I'm tripping, I imagine all of the girls as centaurs, with beautiful female bodies on top and furry wide-footed hoofs on the bottom.

But that's the truly glorious thing about these festivals. All body shapes and sizes are present and proud. I've never seen or heard anyone getting shamed for wearing want they want or dancing how they want or kissing who they want. It's the closest to utopia I think I may ever get. At least my version of utopia, where you don't have to be anyone at all to feel like someone.

When I'm barefoot, I feel most like myself. I didn't get my first pedicure until I was twenty-two years old, at the urging of a new roommate who looked traumatized when I told her I always painted my own toes. When the woman at the salon took a pumice stone to my heel I nearly kicked her in the face.

"What are you doing that for?" I asked her as I gritted my teeth and dug my fingers into the cushioned arm rest on either side of me.

She pointed to the bottom of my foot, "Smooth," she said in broken English. "You very hard. Callous."

But I liked my callouses. They protected me from all the god damn acorns and god damn tree roots. They were my callouses, god dammit. She was undoing all the good work I had done to toughen up my feet. I was living my life on two rough feet that may have been flat, but got me around just fine, probably even better than most. I could walk on searing hot sand without a jump. I stepped on an earring once and it almost went right through my heel, but my skin was so tough it didn't even bleed.

And I'll tell you what, I stubbed my toe walking around the house later that night and put a ding right in the blue polish that manicurist had so carefully applied. That roommate didn't work out, because I didn't like pedicures, and she didn't like bluegrass.

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A memory: It is four in the afternoon. I am at a festival called Hulaween in Suwannee, Florida. The trees are draped in Spanish moss. The people are dressed in costumes and face paint. My friends and I are at the set of a band called Greensky Bluegrass. They have a dobro, a guitar with steel discs, a banjo, a regular guitar, an upright bass, and a mandolin. They are playing so fast that the crowd is cheering as they would at the end of a set, whoops and hollers and yeehaws. The musicians are dressed as angels. It's golden hour. A topless girl offers me a handful of psychedelic fungi. I take a stem, and thank her. She brings her wine-strained mouth close to my ear and asks to braid my hair. At this time, my hair is so long that it reaches my waist. It is my natural, mousy brown. I am wearing it loose. I nod at her. She eats the rest of the mushrooms in her hand, grimaces, and reaches for my beer. I give it to her. She drinks, greedily. Her nipples are painted blue. They brush against my arm as she hands me the beer and moves to my back to comb my knotted, ratty hair with her fingers to start the slow process of separating

sections and winding them over each other. When she is done, the braid is lopsided. I can feel it. I don't care. We bow to each other. I see we are both barefoot. And being here, in this sea of shoeless nobodies, finally, it feels like home.

I am just a barefoot girl in a crowd, a flat-footed girl, some might say a duck-footed girl, but a sure-footed girl. And that right there is just fine, god dammit.

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