

Grateful (Not) Dead

2012, Wednesday, 3pm

You part your hair down the middle with the pointed end of a comb, starting in the center of your forehead and dragging down to the base of your neck. You braid the thick, damp curls flat down one side of your head, then the other, shaking your arms out in between. You tug and tuck as tightly as you can. The plan is to have effortless waves tomorrow when you wake up, after sleeping on the plaits all night, which is quite a lot of effort, actually.

Tomorrow you're leaving for Gathering of the Vibes, a three-day hippie music festival on the beach in Connecticut. You and your boyfriend bought tickets because he followed the Grateful Dead on tour in a white school bus called Casper in his late teens and you pretend to like whatever he likes. You've never been to a proper music festival before, but your friend Megan has, so you told her you have, too.

Megan works with you at the bar, and she has the effortless waves you so desire but hers are natural. And blonde. She is going to the festival too, but for free, because she's always getting things for free. Her hair hangs long down her back, her lips are fuller than yours and her eyes are avocado green. She models sometimes, and gets paid for it, even though she's short, because she has that kind of confidence. She got her scuba license recently so she could do a photo shoot underwater. She shows everyone the pictures.

Megan is the kind of person you want to hate, and did at first, but who bakes brownies in the morning before work and brings them in to share. She's nice and it's real. You want to be her, but you can't let her know that or she won't be your friend. You must pretend like you'd have the confidence to model if you were short, but you're tall, so. She likes to make her own jewelry and doesn't have a TV and got you both backstage at a Gramatik show once. She offers you sips of her drink and sniffs of her drugs and usually pays for the cab home. She chased a homeless woman down the street one night to give her the boots off her feet because she complimented them while you were both smoking a cigarette. You've never considered before now why she had an extra pair of shoes.

Thursday, 11 am

You and the former roadie go pick up your truck. You live in the city and neither of you have a car, so you decide to rent a U-Haul. Why? It must have been cheap. He probably booked it, and you probably didn't ask questions. You're at a depot in Queens that sits on the top floor of a parking garage-type structure and could easily double as a place that the mafia goes to push traitors to their death. It's a desolate concrete desert and the sun is shining so bright and unobstructed that pain is slowly working its way in between your eyebrows.

6pm

The traffic is thick. It's a longer drive than it should be, and you aren't as excited as you want to be by the time you get there. You get inside and meet up with Megan in the middle of a field surrounded by craft tables and vendors who make their own soaps and customized toasters. Megan is there with a coworker who sort of annoyed you and whose name you no longer remember. They are working the VIP area of the show tonight, something involving pink bracelets and pizza delivery, so they're going to be occupied for the rest of the evening. They point to where they'd set up camp and you trek up the hill to pitch your tent beside theirs. You pass a roped-off family area where no alcohol is allowed, and you wonder why anyone would bring their kids here. What you're really wondering is how anyone could get through this mess of a weekend without chemical assistance, and it makes you anxious to think about why this seems so impossible.

There is a couple next to you at the camp sight, she has curly hair and a thrifted dress he is not memorable. They share their weed. They just got married and they're the kind of people who have real jobs and pay their bills and do this sort of thing on the weekend. You would do this any night of the week; you just prefer being near an ocean in a crowd of patchouli-soaked strangers because it makes you feel less incorrect.

In the morning, Megan offers you some K, and you decline because it gives you the thump in the bottom of your pelvis that means it scare-scaries you and not fun-scaries you. She asks if you're sure and you're pretty sure you are.

Friday, 1 am

Primus is playing. They stream a trippy video on a screen on stage with melting and yelling that moves your mood to an uncomfortable place. You're trying to like this band because the people around you like this band so you're swaying and smiling, but you aren't there. It's like the happy is right under the surface, trying to punch its way out, but it can't break through the thick barrier of discomfort that is your skin.

People dress like fairies here with flower crowns and sparkling bodysuits. You did your best to pack clothes that looked hemp-y and homemade but you're not sure you did enough. Some guy rides around a 2-story bike covered in blinking lights. On stage, a magenta spotlight follows giant astronaut floats around and moves your guts more toward nausea. Your boyfriend is passing his joint to a stranger, bending, and laughing in new ways. He's happy.

You hear that people are getting sick. Or they've died? It's hard to know what's true at a festival. Time no longer holds the meaning it did in the real world. Bands perform 24/7 on stages scattered around the venue, so there is time to dance and time to sleep, but no assigned schedule. You plot your days around the bands that you (he) like and try to catch an hour or two of sleep here and there. Tent sleep is bad sleep. It's either way too hot or way too cold, the ground feels rocky and slanted even if you set up camp in the sand. So, the hours seep together

in a stew of whiskey, sweat, and the haze of the summer and your senses start to numb or heighten or both and it's all quite exhausting.

You've heard now more than twice that people who took K from one dealer are being carried out on stretchers, they are past the point of help from the med tent. This is a bummer but a problem for neither you nor Megan since she brought her own and you're too scared to try it.

Friday, 8 pm

You are sitting in the passenger seat of the U-Haul truck parked next to your tent. Tattooed, musical boyfriend is in the driver's seat, smiling more than you're used to. Music is playing from the car stereo and the key is in the ignition, but the car is not started. The lights inside the cab are off. It's almost night.

You are pinching the edges of a 1.5 x 1.5-inch plastic bag and pushing its sides in toward each other to create a bigger hole at the opening. It was full of powdered ecstasy this morning, or maybe yesterday, who can tell? You stick your tongue deep into the bag, empty now except for dust in the corners, and swirl it around to soak up every bit. You poke into the farthest reaches of the plastic and use your finger from the outside of the bag to push the corners into your tongue. Mid slurp, there's a knock on your window. The blood in your chest freezes. It's a cop.

Your insides shatter into tiny blood icicles. There are police at these things, you suppose, but never in your orbit. You slowly pull the bag from your mouth and began to roll down the window. The mustached officer talks at you, saying words that fear won't let you comprehend. There is another, younger cop behind him, but he's not talking at all. Soon you are "stepping out of the vehicle." You are taken to the back of the truck by Quiet Cop, boyfriend to the front by The Mustache.

Quiet Cop is standing in front of a streetlamp, facing you. Your back is to the truck. You are craning to look up at his head, which is now saying words, and is shrouded in the fluorescent light like an angel. You think about what you need to do to appear normal. You aren't sure how much ecstasy you just consumed, but you know it wasn't nothing.

He is saying things to you about the people who got sick. He is saying that some got sent to the hospital, and some were very dehydrated and had to go home. You don't know why he's saying this. The thought of dialing your mom's number from a jail phone and listening to the ring while you twirl the cord and wait to ask her for bail money is now playing slowly and vividly behind your eyes.

The cop has moved on to the question portion of your conversation. He is doing this thing where he asks you a question and then pauses for way too long.

"Where are you from?"

"New York."

Stare. Forever.

“When did you get here?”

“Yesterday.”

Glare. Is he breathing?

“Where did you say you got this truck from?”

“Queens?”

Peer. With squinty eyes.

Behind you, the truck doors click open. You turn to see The Moustache bending into the passenger side. He flips open a switch blade and cuts a small hole in the seat. Now your chest burns. What is this about? You turn back to Formerly Quiet Cop with real concern in your eyes. You’re now watching a brain movie of returning the truck to the mafia garage, stuttering while trying to explain the damage to the seat. Your hands are sweaty. Drugs or fear?

Quiet Cop looks down at you but instead of furrowing, he softens. While you hear the clanging of items being tossed around in the truck behind you, QC explains that they recently got some solid information about the dealer who was selling bad K. Sources revealed that he was dealing out of his truck, and he was spotted doing so earlier that day. He was in a large, white, pickup. A rental.

A U-Haul.

There were apparently only two U-Haul’s at that festival, one that belonged to Tainted K Man and one that belonged to us, and these guys checked out the wrong one first. They got a tip and started slicing open fabric to check for hidden stashes.

Quiet Cop knows you’re not the perp. He becomes apology adjacent, harping on the severity of the situation and nudging you toward seeing why this was an easy mix-up. He offers no solution to the seat hole. The heat is now evaporating from your chest. He’s still talking and you’re becoming impatient, the fear and guilt leaving your body and puddling on the ground. No longer in trouble, you itch to get back to the party.

QC is trying to make friends. He’s killing time while Moustache overturns every crumb in the truck, hoping to uncover some evidence that ties you to the injured and keeps the egg off his face. He’s not giving up. Your cop keeps talking but now the light behind him is beginning to change. It’s starting to pulse.

You remember the drugs.

A smirk is rising to your lips without your permission, but you bite it down. You continue nodding methodically while the white glow slowly expands. You blink a couple of times and first green, then yellow, then red layers of light surround the orb of white. The streetlamp has become a glowing rainbow, and the cop is now wearing a psychedelic halo. It's mesmerizing and ridiculous.

Moustache is finally convinced that you are not ketamine dealers and slams the truck door shut. He signals to his buddy that it's time to go. They march off into the night, down the hill, toward distant sounds of music and the glimmer of strobe lights. You laugh with a mix of relief, confusion, and man-made serotonin.

2021, Sunday, 4pm

You park near the porta-potties right outside the stadium. Pulling into the lot, you can hear Princess Nokia blaring her song onstage and bounce in the car from adrenaline and joy. The traffic was wild, but it doesn't seem to matter. Your now boyfriend, a better boyfriend, is making you laugh by saluting every cop who directs it. He always drives because you hate to. You walk from the car to the stadium in the scorching September afternoon sun. You're wearing an outfit you love, but feel unsure of, and he starts pointing out similar outfits, so you don't feel alone. Citi Field belongs to the Mets most days but today is Governor's Ball, a music festival in Queens with bands you both like.

You wander through the rows of vendors and art installations perfect for Instagram photo ops. You find a tent that serves water and red bull and load up on exceedingly expensive stashes of both. You lay next to each other in the fake grass, head-to-head, hand in hand, and put on sunglasses to take a selfie. You're family. Your hair is bleached and dusty purple and his is orange, naturally so.

6 pm

You're jumping in time with Carly Rae Jepsen in a sea of glistening *Call Me Maybe* diehards. You scream the words, out of tune but full of life. Your ginger jumps too, throwing up his hands and bumping shoulders with the gorgeous, glittery, shirtless men that surround you. You let your heart beat as hard as it wants, you shake your head and close your eyes and inhale the deep pinks and oranges of the sunset. You're happy.

11pm

When Post Malone comes out it's far past your bedtime. You're sitting on the grass because your feet hurt, and your cheeks are pink from sun and smiling. You're in that space of pseudo-hunger that comes from eating too many foods without nutrients, but you couldn't possibly down another french fry. You've started daydreaming of your bed, counting the years between you and all the energized kids around you. A drunk girl is crying into her purse in front of you, drooling and sobbing over a lost phone.

Suddenly, on stage, fog blows and speakers blare. A wave of energy invigorates the crowd. You jump to your feet and a smile bends your face upward. Posty wears a red and white striped t-shirt like Waldo and his hair is characteristically unkempt. He sings loud into the mic, revving up the crowd and pausing for self-deprecating jokes. You don't know most of the words to this song, but you don't care, you're screaming them anyway.

1 am

You settle into the passenger seat; legs numb and ears ringing. You use one foot to push the shoe off the other, then do the same in reverse. You throw your bag in the back seat. You curl your legs up under you and rest your head to the left. You stare, sleepy and full of endorphins at your blue-eyed driver.

He feels your gaze and looks over at you, lips sliding into closed mouth smirk that just barely scrunches up the lines around his eyes. His eyelashes curl long up over his lids, almost white they're so blonde. His eyelids are droopy with the exhaustion that comes from dancing and expressing joy for eight hours straight. Your brain is quiet. You close your eyes, knowing that you'll get home safe. Knowing that you are safe, right here, alive, in your skin.