

Embrace

A Short Story by

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\\ Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah, yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah." Cupboards open and snap shut like a cartoon Venus flytrap in my mind's eye, the acid blotting out reasoning and the sound extinguishing any flickering flare of thought threatening to swell up in my brain. A shrieking petulant child of a woman dances nearby, she had come with me, well us. We were a small encircle of four, previously five, shielding ourselves against the systematically anarchic music providing a background soundtrack. "Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah, yeah yeah yeah yeah." The chorus seemed to have been stuck in a 15-second version of *Groundhog's Day*, sonic doomed to repeat into the ether for all of eternity. I *had* to get closer, I implored myself to get closer. If I concentrated certainly I could float like a cloud above the sweltering mob and earn myself a front-row seat to the spectacle. I focused, I swear, I did, but had no such luck in morphing myself. I wide-eyed the inner crowd for another point of entry, the parameters were in a constant state of shift as people danced, videotaped, tripped, or some combination of the three. I turn to my buddy for assistance, and for a moment I picture with luscious ecstasy how wondrous it would be to cannonball straight into the black pool of his dilated pupils, splashing through the front of the eye as I dive further and further into his head, swimming past the retina and into his melting brain as I gander among the numerous shelves of thoughts and images packed into file cabinets making up his lifetime. I peel away, delving further into the mystical crowds of people keeping me from clambering onto the stage and disappearing into a light beam. "I'll meet you at The Spot!" I call over my shoulder to my friend, who stares blankly back at me through a tangle of beach-stained blond hair, mouth slightly agape in an oval shape. I slip into the crowd I move with intention but without purpose, waiting for liftoff.

"Yup, that'll getcha." Tyler reads off his phone calculator the number "84.5", the amount of THC that had been packed into the brownie that had been ticking away in her stomach since its' consumption about an hour and a half ago. Danielle swayed like a weed in the wind in the

backseat, her eyes, surrounded by gold glitter sparkled from high cheekbones to forehead. We were about five minutes out from the closest available entrance to the festival.

"It's definitely this way, right?" I ask the question with no response. The girls continued to tend to Danielle as Tyler lent his best support.

"We should just hoof it from here." I air through my own haze of toxins while I fight the mind-numbing settlement currently colonizing my brain. I had split one of the brownies with Tyler to prep for Panorama, the music festival thrown by the organizers of Coachella to move their brand of hippy music capitalism to summer New York through the July 22nd weekend while casting a sideways middle finger to Governor's Ball, the previous ruler of the East Coast major festival scene. Danielle, Tyler, Lindsey, and Grace had attended the previous day, falling under the syrupy sweet sermons of Kendrick Lamar while rolling in the stampeded on green grass of Randall's Island. I had shown up for the finale Sunday, calling in sick as your friendly neighborhood busboy because life sucks then you die until you find the moments where you decide it doesn't. I had desired to witness Flatbush Zombie's particular brand of live debauchery but had missed them by at least three hours, all that was left of interest to me was A\$AP Rocky, Run the Jewels, Sia, whatever the fuck LCD Soundsystem is, plus the four joints and the thick thunk gel tab of acid stuffed down into my pubes for self-keeping.

"Heyo, we're never gonna get out of this traffic, let's move." I open the passenger door and step out, followed by the quadruplet in the backseat. We're all in our best costumes, a collection of jean shorts and scarce fabric tops. We journey down the sidewalk, Tyler and I walk out in front with Lindsey and Grace holding a hand of Danielle's apiece, keeping her upright and stuttering down the sidewalk. Tyler and I exchange a sideways look, praying to the High Holy that the fresh air creeps up to her cranium and she'll be able to make it inside without imploding like a stoned Death Star. She doesn't. No more than five minutes down the sidewalk do the girls splinter off towards a

private spot under the bridge chiming towards us "We have to do girl things!" Me and Tyler wait on the side of the road, muttering to each other and groaning about "amateurs". Minute's tick-tock bye, we hang our heads resigned to the catastrophe that is sure to be unfolding just over the knoll that the trio had disappeared behind. *Fucking A*, we found the girls doing exactly what our worst conjurations had us picturing, Danielle, mid-marijuana induced panic being subdued by the pair of sobers with an official-looking golf cart pulled up adjacent. I drop my hidden stash of brownies behind a column, the situation was most likely fine, other than the cute thin girl currently laying on the ground piercing the skies with cries about a heart attack, but I have an unfortunate habit of being overly paranoid because I'm a nervous little prick.

"What's going on?" Tyler wants to know, his voice tinged with more than a minimum amount of annoyance.

"Nothing she's fine." Lindsey shoots back. *Really?* Because it doesn't fucking look like it.

"She'll be okay in a minute."

"I don't know."

"Should I call another Uber?"

"She's fine, she's just really fucking baked."

"Give her some space."

"Do you need anything Danielle?"

"She can't really stand."

"The cars back, let's get her into it."

It's a four-person job, Grace, Lindsey, the event official from the golf cart, and thankfully the Uber driver was a father and kind and understanding. She lays silent on her back, comatose. A second golf cart pulls up, barking at the first in an inquiry if everything was all right. It

was, assured the first assister. The golf cart drove on, presumably to its next flailing teenager.

"You guys go ahead, we'll take care of her." Are we assholes if we leave? I mean, yeah we are, but by this time Run the Jewel's *had* to have started by now and we *had* paid for our tickets already with no teensy chance at refund so we *might as well* go ahead.

"So, what the fuck we gonna do?" I turn to Tyler for advice, he shrugs his shoulders at me, neglecting to answer. We continue to stare at the disaster unfolding in front of us.

"All right enough, we need to get her some help." The event official exerted control over the situation while nodding his head and spoke softly into his walkie-talkie, calling for medical service. Our Uber driver leaves and our event official assures us we won't get into any trouble. Tyler shakes his head and moves to sit on a nearby concrete block. We were no more than sixty steps from the entranceway.

"She's just really baked."

"She's really really stoned, that's it." We come to an agreement with synonym sentences, either too irked or too high to comment anything else. A car arrives, lights flashing from the top. It's not an officer, but it's enough to make me feel queasy.

"Guys, go, there's nothing you can do." The official orders us off and we stop thinking twice about it and scurry guiltily away. We were past the point of no return by the time I remembered the girls had all the joints and I had forgotten the hidden away brownies.

Lindsey showed up moments after Tyler and I had started moving ahead in the security line, delaying our entrance *just a little bit* longer. We waited impatiently for her to go through the line and catch up.

"I have the weed." Lindsey was our savior. "It's kinda up my ass right now." Oh.

The security check goes smoothly, I hadn't brought much; wallet, notebook, pen, cigarettes, and lighter. Phone had been discovered broken the same morning, refusing to turn on or charge. Messages were gonna have to be sent via carrier pigeon. I stuff the notebook back into the back waistband part of my jeans, lighter into the lighter pocket. Wallet was missing. Tyler and Lindsey were already gone so I trotted myself back to retrieve what I surely must have left on the table.

"Excuse me, I think I left my wallet on the table here when I came through." I batted my eyelashes and smiled as sweetly as I could at the face-neutral security woman. She barely took a glance at me.

"I haven't found one, ask the security guard over there on the side." She says before returning to her search of a beige backpack being carried by a bulky boy with brownish dreadlocks. That security guard hadn't been handed anything either, I did a quick gaze across the gravel ground for the lost item, no luck, wallet was gone. I walked the final stretch alone, tingling from the feeling of knowing My Person was down to nothing but a grey Bic and a fucking notebook. No cash, no credit card, no ID, no form of communication.

"Where did he go?" Tyler stood on his tippy toes to try to search over the oncoming crowd.

"He was right behind us." Lindsey looked at her phone before remembering the attempt was futile. Can't reach me. Drove of smiling faces swept through, their ears piqued to chime into the music coming from the center stage a little over two football fields away.

"What ended up happening with Danielle?"

"She's in the medical tent with Grace."

"Is she gonna come back out?"

"Danielle or Grace?"

"Who do you think?"

"Yeah, Grace said she'll meet us out in the field in like twenty minutes." Tyler had one thing on his mind and that was ensuring he was in Grace's lovely graces. They had made out a wee bit the day before and he had every intention of upping the ante today. Being stuck on a solo mission with Lindsey and Ben was on the bottom of his priority lists that evening. He had been stranded for the past twenty minutes.

"Yo! Guys!" I found the other two and jogged to catch up.

"Where the fuck you been?" Tyler challenged me.

"I lost my wallet."

"You lost your wallet?"

"Yeah sacrifice to the festival gods, don't worry about it let's just go." I was sick of waiting around, and the wallet wasn't going to magically drop from the sky in front of me anytime soon. Mercifully, we finally walked into the festival grounds, a tower covered in advertisement boards and topped by a video board displayed the main stage where Run The Jewels were about two-thirds through their set. On the right side, a fancy-schmancy VIP American Express sat centered on the field with the porta-potty area on its left. We entered on the left so it was on this closer several niche food tents formed into a straight-lined border against the fence until a small hill comes up adjacent to the stage and there's nothing on there. A white dome-looking thing covered in fluorescent neon lights stood at our direct left and a field of erected sprinklers designed to keep the goers cool took up the back center of the field. Killer Mike shouts out the heat stroking gaggle of riotous attendees directly in front of him.

"Yo, you motherfuckers are crazy in this heat. Jumping around and shit, shoutout the best mosh pit in the world right here." A roar erupts from the front clique in a gratuitous blend of non-distinct cheering. Mike and his RTJ partner, El-P, continued to play to the crowd as we sat under the sprinklers and caught our breath.

"I'm dropping in."

Ignored.

"Tyler, I'm dropping in?"

He puts his hand up to keep me at bay while stressfully growling at me.

"Give me a second, I'm trying to get my head back straight."

"I want some!" Lindsey gleed towards us.

"Haven't you never done it before?"

"Yeah." Tyler ESP's a thought over to me

"Don't give her the acid, don't give her the acid, DON'T GIVE HER THE FUCKING ACID BRO!" I give her the acid, the microest of microdoses. A gel ball so small it sits on my thumb's nail. Tyler's eyes burn a hole in the back of my head. He and I take ours, the red dissolving on our tongues with a "Pop Rocks" sizzle. Run the Jewels move onto their encore, an a-cappella back-and-forth that I struggle to identify from the distance. Their set ends, they thank the crowd and walk off as the crowd disperses backward towards the food tents and the sweet cooling relief of the misting sprinklers. We fight against the current like salmon, moving in the supposed direction of the medical tent. Somebody offers me five goddamn dollars for a cigarette, a thick bearded 21st-century hippy compliments my "Chillin The Most" basketball jersey, and Grace appears out of the masses and informs us we're going backward of where we're supposed to be.



"Can we smoke one of the joints first?" She pleads in an attempt to break the monogamous stress of the evening.

"I've been waiting for somebody to ask." Not particularly true, I had asked a few times already, but I'm not a pretty blonde girl so go eat crow. We shift over to the opposite side and take up position on that low sloping hill beside the stage. Tight ensembles of millennials are strewn around, interweaving with the slightest bit older couples taking up the other majority of the population. One pair makes out on a bright blue beach blanket, nobody pays them any mind.

"Go to the top, I want to look out over the crowd." There isn't really a "top" the hill is only about 15 feet long. We oblige the request anyways. The view improves slightly. We light the joint, Sia appears as it burns down to about the halfway point.

I was never a big fan of the mysterious and enigmatic Sia, her music is enjoyed just outside my circle. Live performances often elevate the music you listen to scarcely, a hole carved into your melodic pallet being filled by the reverberations emulating off the stage and bringing itself full force into your ears to radically bounce perspective. Her voice borders on otherworldly, a former songwriter to the stars who decided she was going to keep her talents to herself and become the mega pop star of her destiny. The music is companioned by kooky visuals featuring actors Kristen Wiig and Paul Dano and an on-stage rendition of two persons decked out in a panda and bunny head beating the shit out of each other with a foam hammer.

"The nurse from the medical tent is texting me, Danielle's awake, and she wants to go home." Grace reads from her phone.

"I'll go with you." Lindsey volunteers.

"If we all go maybe we can convince her to stay." Tyler attempts to reign us back in. "Go as a big team effort and she'll change her mind." The joint runs on empty and we

roll down the hill. We're herded through the passageway behind the stage by two parallel running chain-link fences and the friendliest red-shirted nurse. Briefly, I thought of sneaking off so I could spend the festival hanging out backstage. Maybe meet a starlet or a groupie. Inside the tent, a screaming drunken man disturbs the peace and attempts to stand up but is quickly put back down by two police officers as a third sits and giggles to himself while observing. Our fallen trooper lays sleeping underneath one of those shiny silver space blankets. Tyler turns to me and musters the best deadpan he can through his typical jovial voice.

"Yo, I don't think she's gonna make it." We take up position by twos on either side of her, separated by gender. Lindsey begins to cry, Danielle awakens long enough to let us know not to tell her father. He's a priest. The minute's tick by. Sia's voice is just barely heard through the jailing canvas walls and nurses of different tiers of understanding come and go. One tangent on our responsibility as friends and how we had failed her and of course Lindsey only sobs harder. I take her outside to calm her down, deep breathes and deep breathes and deep breathes and all that. She stops crying, forces a smile. I notice my shorts have lost a bit of weight, my notebook was gone. Fucking yeesh dude. I prioritize the lost object to the bottom, silently praying we decide to head back so as not to lose my mother's 19th birthday present to me. Inside the tent the mood is desolate.

"She's just stoned outta her mind."

"This is the most peaceful sleep she will ever have." Tyler and I echo our previous rhetoric. The original nurse, the friendly one, approaches. She grins enough to put us at ease.

"You guys should go back in, there's nothing you can do here. She's going to be asleep for a while."

"I don't want to leave her." Grace's eyes shine with a tug between the urge to make the most of the day's investment and unshakable ocean-deep compassion for her friend.

"Go out, have fun, she's comfortable here. I'll text you when she wakes up." I breathe a silent thank you, the odds of us returning to the fray had been noticeably dwindling before the intervention.

"Don't go back the same way you came in, they'll ask you for passes you don't have and I can't give you. To get back in, stay right when you leave the text and walk the path next to the fence and the entrance will be on the left. You can just walk in from there."

"Thank you, thank you so much." Grace scampers up and brings her into a hug. The woman might as well have been Jesus coming off the cross to throw us a lifeline as we drowned in a middling brown river of shit. The four of us speed walk outta there, three nurses on a smoke break crack into smiles as they see us. One of them, young with an arm tribal tattoo and a yellow bandana brandished across his forehead, shouts at us gleefully.

"Go get it guys! Go get it!" They offer us high fives we gladly return, foreseeing the day finally turning around.

"Thank you so much! Thank you so much! You're the best!" They were ridiculously cliché quotes, but we really couldn't think of anything else. Following the directions, we come across a festival employee sitting on top of a truck and doing no work. He watches the scene unfold knowing he's being paid for these minutes of peaceful thought. We nod our heads towards him in respect.

Back in the festival, Sia is rounding out her set. The actors from the accompanying visuals take their bows on the video boards and those upfront begin to drift back towards the festival's other entertainment. I was still too embarrassed to admit I had lost my notebook so I wait until our position is set until I branch off to locate it. I found it, wrapped up in a knot in the corner. Somebody had done that.

The fascinating aforementioned Dome beckons us and all that comes through with the opportunity to see the myths

that lie within. We wait in line, our cigarettes burning our eyeballs into body instinctive tearing. Tyler goes to fill his water bottle and comes back with a story.

"You gotta check out this dude at the water filling station." I peek over, scanning right to left until my eyes are drawn to a magenta hat boldly perched backward on one of the vendors, the hat defies laws of gravity as it hangs just barely on the upper half quadrant of his head. He jumps on his toes in perpetuity, snapping his head so hard it has to have rolled off his goddamn neck by now.

"How much coke do you think he's on?"

"At least Al Pacino at the end of *Scarface*, though he may be inventing his own scale."

The line has dissipated by now and our exterior switches to a dimly lit interior complete with wall-to-wall interactive visual art exhibits. Waiting in line for the Visceral Recess, an adult bouncy castle of sorts stands a gorgeous gentleman of six feet equipped with tattoos up and down his caramel-toned arms and four beaded African necklaces banging against his chest. He was your type of music festival; artist, psychedelic devotee, believing in all the free-flowing of the universe half laminated off of Confucius and half made up of bullshnoze. We ask if A\$AP Rocky was coming on next, he lets us know that he had already performed, we feel moronic. Jumping up and down on the bouncy castle shrugs the feeling off which I guess is the point.

Inches before her turn, Grace is called off to return to Danielle, jettisoning the entertainment in a haste. Tyler comes out of the castle and looks around in a search.

"Where did Grace go?" He asks.

"The nurse texted her that Danielle was awake, she went to get her."

He breaks off after her without another word, leaving me to care for the acid virgin Lindsey who was slipping under a warm blanket of bewilderedness. We wait in line for one more attraction before throwing our hands up in a "fuck it" declaration.

"Let's go back outside." She says. We stagger around for the exit before locating a black tent flap, presumably the way to fresh air. It wasn't. Instead, we're forced to contend with the most bonkers cinematic experience ever encountered, or even fathomed for that matter. The tent funnels you into it before you're able to reach the exit. Inside of a large white painted circle about twenty-five feet across in all directions lies the entire festival's demographics staring straight up at a senseless sensible movie being projected against the gaping dome aspect of The Dome.

"We have to leave!" Lindsey scream whispers at me as I maneuver my way into an available lying position in the middle. I do my best to shush her. "I can't do this!"

"Lindsey embrace it. Lay back and stare up and just embrace."

"I'm leaving!" She says as she lies down next to me. She widens her eyes in an attempt to absorb the white rings that come flying down onto us one after another until they reach the edges of the screen and disappear. We're being transported onto an alien beam into the Neverlands of the sky, our skin tingling uncontrollably. The screen switches to green and blue splotches resembling the images that appear when you shut your eyes real tight. We, and this we I mean everybody lost under the current blinking lights, continue on this supernatural wave until the movie ends before we even have a chance to notice that we're together in this. Lindsey and I follow the herd to the exit where we finally inhale oxygen with vigor. We try to figure out our next move with the concentration of a chess master.

"Where did Grace and Tyler go?"

"She's gonna take an Uber home, it's on the way right now. Don't worry we'll escort her to the car and make sure she gets home." Grace nods with all the control she can towards the nurse and surrounding officials. Tyler nods at her pace. They were back in the medical tent, Danielle was awake and capable, all she needed at that point was a safe, warm bed. The salvation was Grace's apartment and was a mere fifteen minutes away. Trooper that she is, she insisted that they stay and enjoy themselves.

"You do understand how dangerous this could have been, correct?" A police officer towers over them, running through a riot act of Reefer Madness.

"Yeah we know, it was an accident and we've learned our lesson." Tyler does his best to answer in sincerity but he's having trouble focusing as the officer's head is being sucked into a hypnotic swirl and all he can think of is the pink cotton candy machine from the Italian Fair his mother used to take him to when he was a child. On cue, the officer's head is now a bright fluff of the sweet treat, complete with snowmen like eyeballs, nose, mouth, and ears. He's transfixed by the lips moving up and down speaking words he cannot hear and he's just about to reach up and take a piece off and pop it into his mouth when Grace comes to the accidental rescue.

"Can we go say goodbye to her before she leaves?"

"Of course."

The officer sweeps his arms and directs them to a back exit where Danielle sits waiting for the car to arrive and whisk her away. They give her hugs as she sits half-awake. The black Prius pulls up and they put her into the car and do the "Titanic" wave as she leaves. They turn to one another and start giggling.

I'm dancing by myself, limbs moving as independent variables in at least some semblance of rhythm to the LCD Soundsystem song. I had no idea the name, I'm resigned to admit I don't know any of their songs. The first time I had

heard about them was when I read they were reuniting at Coachella earlier this year to kickoff off their reunion tour. They had disbanded amicably at one point. From the live performance, I ascertain the music is some sort of post-modern Allman Brothers, a 2016 jam band purposely hovering around the peripherals of pop, poking the middle with a ten-foot pole for their amusement before throwing up the finger and walking away.

Tyler and Grace roar back into the picture, Tyler barking at me that we had to go find where A\$AP Rocky is playing. I relay the information that his time had come and gone.

"So this is it?"

"Yeah." He immediately pulls the pencil case of joints from his bag and lights one.

"This is it! Smoke em all now!" We chain-smoke one after another. We stand to the left of the stage, on the hill next medical tent that had become the banes of our fucking existence. We're as close as we can get to the front without shoving and are perfectly docile in our environment. People stand on the edge in loose formations, dancing for nobody. Lindsey does her best to mold her dancing to the foreign music, doing a pretty damn good job at it even as she screams. "This music is butthole!" We all laugh unconsciously and continue staring at the stage. As we put flame to paper on the third smoke a small collection of girls tap Grace and Lindsey on the shoulder and propose that they get their faces painted. Immediately gold paint lights up their face, I'm enamored by one, thirty-seven percent sure I'm falling in love with this stranger, a black-haired petite with an Australian accent, flashing me with the type of miraculous smile usually bestowed on a peppy kindergartener's face. My heart warmed and encouraged take this girl in and embrace her with the most love I have in my being. I resist and settle to hand her and the friends the joint, letting it get passed around in a circle. I do my best to work my mind into a state in which I can have a pleasant conversation with her but deflate into the reality that this is neither the time nor

the place. I surrender and begin to step off as LCD launches into the chorus of "Yeah Yeah"s.

Lowering my shoulder to clear some space and worm my way closer to the middle, I have no intention of the direction. My biggest goal is to suck up every bit of shenanigans into my pores and hold the feeling inside so I have enough to last me the rest of my lifetime. I ache for this feeling now, it's stronger than the drugs, or it is the drugs, flip a coin and the answer will probably be on the landing. Stranger's faces reflect with the lights that cover every spectrum of the color wheel plus the ones that are just being made up. I smile at those that lock eyes with me, occasionally receiving one in return. I briefly consider the idea of going to get some food and a cool drink but remember that my wallet has been lost for ages at that point. There's nothing more I remember about the music other than that it was omnipresent and all-consuming and omnipotent even while it left me detached enough to operate in this small pocket alone. Songs milk into the next with no sense of reform, cheers erupt at the slightest of breaks.

"NANCY WHAAAAAAAANG" a shirtless gentleman shouts as a keyboard solo powers through the speakers and I presume the Whang is the Asian woman with the black bob haircut that is currently being featured on the video board. I crane my neck up to the sky to see the clouds morphing themselves into green skulls that begin to crash into each other with slow-moving inevitability. *That's pretty cool*, I think. I look away, now to the Manhattan skyline that sits itself just across the Harlem River, the Empire State building reaching up to the heavens and carving a hole for itself.

I look down to realize I'm sparkling and glowing like the yellow five-pointed star that gives Mario invincibility. I must have jumped up and hit the box without realizing it. The glow radiates off of me as I ping back and forth knowing that I could not be hurt until the customary 30-second power-up intermission ends. I was lost, so were half the people there in one shape or another,



feeling as if I had just been taken underwater by a massive ocean wave and now couldn't figure out how to work my compass. I hop on Yoshi's green scaly back and ride him as he trots to and fro in the back of the crowd. People clear space as we're not bothering nobody, my steed and I just enjoying ourselves peacefully. He sticks his long tongue out and rears back knocking me off onto the soft grass as he gallops away into the river. I wave goodbye and a silent thank you for getting me off of my feet. I sit on my butt for a while, fingers gripping into the ground caking dirt into my fingernails. I take in my surroundings, I'm actually at the fallback spot, the American Express bar. I glance around with the brief fleeting hope that my friends had come back here to find me and there's no such luck. I stand and dust myself off, dancing amid the shallow white pool of light that basks down from overhead. I begin to run through my options of departure, no wallet so taxi was out, no phone so couldn't call a car that would already have my card plugged in, I mentally prep myself to walk home. Nodding my head ludicrously to the music to pump up the confidence that I was going walk across the bridge and an additional sixty blocks back to Grace's apartment. My friends will know I'm fine. I keep myself entertained until paranoia begins to seep in. The lights are now paralyzing me as I wait and pray for salvation.

"We have a couple songs left, thank you for being an unbelievable crowd tonight." LCD lead singer James Murphy booms from the stage. Down to the dilemma of staying rooted in the spot and hoping I am discovered in wait or to wander back over to the opposite side in the glimmering sliver of a chance that I find the trio. I wrestle with the decision as people filter out around me, getting a head start on departing. I crave to be returned to normalcy and a goosebump-inducing creep finds itself spreading across the under part of my skin turning me inside out. It pushes me off like a schooner out to sea and I begin the travel to the other side, pitter-pattering around people until I'm in the vague area where I last left the blondes. Nowhere to be seen I remember the words of earlier about getting a better view and walk to the top of the hill, turning my head every few moments to glance over my shoulder to see if they would

miraculously pop up. On the final turn back forward I see The Girl, flocked by her four friends.

"Hi." It's the best I got.

"Hi!" She shouts back at me with the slightest confusion and the fullest of glee.

"Do you remember me? I think we met earlier, I was with the girl's faces you painted."

"Yeah!"

"Oh, cool, have you seen them? I kinda wandered off and now I'm half-lost."

"No, but you can wait up here with us and we'll help you look!" If God had decided to smite me at the moment I woulda been all right with it. It was the night's peak. I realized that my understanding of the world was misplaced but now I knew where to place it. I guess that's what love is. And I guess that's how your shining portrait of devilishly innocent youth is dismantled.

"Do you have a dart?" Dart is Australian for cigarettes.

"No, I'm sorry," and I was. "I smoked them all already."

"That's all right." I sit down next to her and remove my notebook to jot down an insignificant.

"What is that?" She peers over my shoulder.

"I'm a writer, I was gonna do a piece about tonight from beginning to end."

"Can I draw a picture in it?"

"It would be an honor and a privilege." I hand over the moleskin notebook as she places herself next to me and begins to doodling in the dark. One of her friends looks down at me

"Oh hi, your friends were looking for you."

"Yeah I know, we got separated."

"Can you call them?"

"My phone broke this morning before I got here. And I got no wallet, it's fine though, I'll walk home." I smile through the madness. I attempt to stretch my neck like Mr. Fantastic to get the best possible view of the crowd. I had already been a Nintendo character that night, maybe it had given me crossover superpowers of the *Fantastic Four*. It doesn't work that way and I remain isolated from my friends. I sit making faces at nothing as the music begins to fade.

"Thank you so much Panorama have a great night and get home safe!" LCD leaves the stage and the devotees in front briefly clamor for an encore before the massive overhead stadium lights come on for the first time extinguishing any chance.

"Well, now what?" I say to nobody.

"Do you want us to walk with you and try to find them?" The Girl's friend asks me.

"I was supposed to meet them by the bar on the other side if all else fails, so I was gonna go check over there."

"We'll walk you over."

"Are you sure? You really don't have to do that."

"Of course, no problem."

"Hang on let me finish my drawing." She puts the finishing touches on the drawing and hands over the notebook. I squint to see as best as I can in the limited light. It's a simplistic masterpiece. A full rendition of the stage with one stick figure standing alone with the crowd surrounding. We slowly begin moving over to the bar.

"I loved the drawing, you gotta sign your work though."

"Yeah!" I hand the notebook back over where she flips to the page and scribbles in her signature. I prepare my best cool guy line of "you have to sign your work with your phone number, that's a rule." But I let it slip back into the bowels of my brain, the thought of seeing her again scares me more than the idea of walking home had previously. Some moments are meant to be left in the milk crate and carried up it into the attic where you occasionally dust it off and silently reminisce about *That One Time*. I spot my people and sprint to jump into their arms. We scream nonsensicalness in celebration. We issue huge thank yous and hugs to my saviors as we make our exit.

"What time is it?"

Tyler checks his watch.

"Eleven."

"No, it's not."

"Yes, it is."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Time musta stopped at one point. I ask Tyler for a lighter, he digs into his backpack, brushing items around until he stops at one.

"Yo Jack, is this your wallet?"

