

The Year They Busted Marley Fest

In Austin, Texas, at about three in the morning, the streets are quiet. I go to the sink in Melissa's bathroom and drink tap water with a cupped hand once, twice, five times before I turn the faucet off. Rachel sleeps on the couch in a twisted position that still holds my ghost. It's the 19th of April.

Rachel's hair spreads around the couch cushion like brown rays of sunlight and even in the dark of downtown Austin I can still see the cute mess she makes when she sleeps. She has one long dreadlock that's braided with shreds of a Rasta tee. A reminder, she said, that anything and everything is knotted together in some way. I'm careful to reposition myself on the edge of the couch and she turns away from me, burying her face in the couch's back and her knees against mine. I lay my head down in her drool-spot and then move just an inch to the right where it's dry.

Rachel woke up the next morning with a crick in her neck and Jessica, Melissa's roommate, torched a bong and passed it.

"I don't know how y'all slept on that couch," Jessica said. "It's way too small. Besides, I don't know if you'd want to sleep on that anyway." Jessica leaned on the arm of the couch and looked down the hall to see Melissa's door still closed. "Melissa gets laid on that couch like once a week," she said.

Rachel twisted her face while she set the bong on the coffee table. It's a blend of red, and white, and blue, and looks a little like the American flag. Attached to one side of the wall in their living room was a large, Plasma TV. Icicle-Christmas lights skirted the paneling along the ceiling. The chalkboard in the hallway had the beginnings of a grocery list, only to be

shorthanded in strange hieroglyphics—drawings of a coffee mug, a siamese cat, and a lopsided yin-yang clearly favoring the side of yin.

Melissa's door opened and her feet cracked with each step on the floors. "That's the one we're sneaking in to Marley Fest," Melissa said, walking in a second too late. She can't defend herself against the couch accusation and it stays in the back of both Rachel's and my mind for the next couple of days while we sleep on it. "Nothing screams America like a day-long marathon of reggae and illegal substances, right?"

I laughed nervously. Never in my life would I dream of smoking with the entire police force of Austin's lower section less than thirty feet away.

Jessica grabbed a Mickey's from the fridge and told us not to worry. "The locals will take care of everything," she said. "The whole point of coming to Austin is to stop, even if it's for a second." Melissa just nodded and Rachel stared stupidly at the TV hanging on the wall.

My nightly visits to the sink would continue and so too would the crick in Rachel's neck.

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Rachel slips the window down about an inch. She studies the way the smoke hovers around the open window as it slowly darts out onto the highway. My head gets a little lighter and I think about Austin like it's some myth. The road stretches out before me.

"We don't even know what we're doing," I said.

"But, isn't that exactly what we want to do?" she said.

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The first night in Austin we spend on 6th Street touring the bars and the moderately-priced drinks. Even in the middle of South Texas and late spring the nights are cool. Rachel, Jess,

and Melissa walk side-by-side in Burberry heels, and Marc Valvo dresses. I'm in a black hoodie smoking a cigarette. Rachel gives me a look but I get away with it by saying it's just because we're drinking. Her dreadlock distracts from the elegance she tries to exude, and even though she borrowed the dress from Melissa it's the only real thing about her on this night.

The three of them shared a bottle of free champagne given to Melissa by a bartender she actually in fact did sleep on the couch with. I had to ask the guy, but really wished I hadn't. I ended up buying Long Islands by the pair because it is woefully hell trying to order a drink on 6th Street when Marley Fest is in town, or even if it's just a weekend. The police on the corner drank beers and ate 6th Street pizza.

The music pipelined through the bars made us drink heavily. We couldn't hear each other talk unless we yelled and even then it could only be one or two words. Drinking was the acceptable social response to not speaking.

"Shots!" Melissa said, handing me a group of four. We toast and simultaneously knock our glasses on the counter and toss them back.

"What was that to?" I asked.

"To more shots!" yelled Jessica back at me and she carried several more over.

"To shots!" the four of us yelled at each other and again we tossed them back.

We closed down the bars that night and walked the drunk mile back to Jessica and Melissa's apartment down Chavez Street. When we finally got back we drank a beer and prepared for the 20th of April. A holiday in any counterculture.

Jessica tells me people of all kinds come out to Austin for Marley Fest. I can still just barely hear anything and Rachel looks like she's all but passed out at this point.

“You have the typical stoner types,” she says. “Then there’s the trippy types, the twisted types—”

“The uppers, the downers,” Melissa picks up.

“The business executives.”

“The musicians, writers, painters.”

“Helicopter pilots, doctors and nurses.”

“Anyone looking for a jump, or something just to mix their minds up a little.”

“A crossing point of all cultures and cults,” I said.

“Exactly,” Jess said, raising her beer in the highest kind of drunken appreciation.

Rachel was already passed out with a Mickey’s in her hand.

“What’s that dreadlock in her hair?” Melissa said.

“She says it’s about the universe knotting together,” I said. “Like hair or something.”

Jessica asked if I didn’t believe her. “Some days I do,” I said.

“Listen,” said Jess, “tomorrow, at 4:20, they’ll stop the music and everything gets quiet. Just listen for the sound of emptiness. It’s practically Nirvana.”

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The gas tank gets one mark closer to empty and I take the next exit to fill up. We’re in Round Rock and Austin is almost visible over the hills. Rachel sleeps. I can’t help but not wipe the string of drool from her cheek. Instead, I listen to the road silence and the whir of something happening another thirty miles ahead. Austin had something in store. Something between the streets of Lamar, Guadalupe, Red River, 12th and 7th, Chavez, the Colorado River. I probably drove just a little slower to keep that myth-image alive. I slid the window down an inch and

looked at the invisible air hover between the window and outside with Austin waiting just over the hills and overpasses.

“We’re backed up,” I said.

“Look, our exit is like right there,” Rachel said. “We’re so close we could just walk.”

“Yeah, but we’re backed up. We aren’t going to move much quicker than this.”

“I’ll call Jess and Melissa and let them know. We were supposed to be there like an hour ago.” I wanted to say she wasn’t even awake an hour ago so what difference does it make but I kept my mouth shut. I honked the horn instead.

“Shhh. . .” Rachel said. She dialed a number and rubbed her eyes from the sleep she barely just woke up from. “Yeah, we may not be in for another hour or so,” she said. “It’s just a lot of traffic. Okay. Just leave it at the desk and we’ll grab the key to put our stuff in the apartment. Awesome. Thanks, Jess. Bye.” She yawned as she hung up.

“What the hell are we doing?” I said.

“We’re backed up,” Rachel said. After a moment she wiped her cheek.

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Melissa and Jessica unfolded and spread out the Navajo blanket. Rachel tossed pillows and I kicked off my shoes and lit a joint to contribute to the smoke already building above us. Marley Fest, also known as Reggae Festival, is really just an open field in Auditorium Shores where a couple thousand people of multiple generations come together to get sunburned and legally smoke illegal grass. The only noise that comes from the festival are the vintage reggae

tunes of Bob Marley, a surprise performance of A Tribe Called Quest, and Cypress Hill jamming from stereos and speakers around the tree line and concession stands.

People walked around with Ziploc bags half-full of lethally-high brownies. Further down the field, near the concession stands, was a six-foot bong that took at least three people to carry. A guy stood on a platform above it, a volunteer torched the bowl, and the guy fell down, coughing and writhing in an unpleasant high that's about to close on him. It looked great.

Auditorium Shores is just south of the Colorado and on any other day it's easy to hear the river float through Austin, but the air still doesn't hang quite right this late in spring. Austin's wind had nothing on the sun's heat. I was sweating before we got there, and this had nothing to do with the battalion of cops nearby, or so I told myself. Melissa had said there were more than usual. Something was up, but I was too high to really notice. News helicopters kept their distance, hovering over what must've been the same traffic from two days ago. The whole nature of the festival is meant to escape under the radar just long enough for the locals to actually miss it. This year warranted a different feel.

"This is Austin," Melissa said. My head's in Rachel's lap and she smiles and plays with my hair and I pass the joint up to her. Even without looking I can see how she frowns and takes a hit, then passes it and picks bits of bud from her tongue. She wiped it on my shirt.

"This is really it," Jess said. "No one is really supposed to do anything."

I understood what they meant when they said that Austin was a place to stop. A Tribe Called Quest got on stage and began meshing out the same beats from the 90s we grew up to along with the relaxed, trademarked flows. We didn't really know what we wanted to do, but that was exactly what we wanted to do. To do nothing but nothing.

“See,” Rachel said, elbowing me, “everything just sort of gets knotted together.” The truth of what she believed ribboned up into the atmosphere, like the mixing of exhaled smoke from a couple thousand people and their lungs. It all came together in one whole piece, and the more we all smoked, the more we felt the same.

What happens between 4:15 and 4:28 is only seen once in Austin, Texas. Sometimes it is only seen once in a lifetime. If you drive downtown and look South along the Colorado, a huge haze of marijuana smoke larger than entire blocks of 6th Street lifts the reggae music of Bob Marley up the river, through the streets, and around the entire city limits. The haze breaks upward in psychedelic waves speaking on frequencies only a quarter of Austin actually understands. The cloudless sky breaks open and the heat is forgotten about if only for a moment. The sun filters through nothing and for thirteen minutes out of an entire year it feels like there’s harmony out there in the universe, knotting together.

For just a moment A Tribe Called Quest stopped playing, giving a sacred stretch of time the silence it needed to break into our suspended consciousness. The feeling of space distended around each of us in Auditorium Shores. Melissa and Jessica held hands and sat across from each other with closed eyes, traveling into the next dimension.

“This is the only time,” Rachel said, “where I’ve ever felt what it means to be almost nothing.”

Far off in the distance I heard silence like it came in one long wave. “Pure Nirvana,” I said. And then, just as A Tribe Called Quest began playing music again, the four of us came back to each other, meditating in the middle of Auditorium Shores on a Navajo blanket, surrounded by

the same Free Love atmosphere that must've happened in the 60s all those years ago, transplanted by the music and the drugs that helped make a generation.

The peaceful thirteen minutes we felt in that open Austin field. . . Jessica interrupted first. "What's that noise?" she said. Far above helicopters chopped our way, splitting the air of all the quiet atoms we had just barely come to believe in.

Then, sirens broke out all around us. The only thing I could hear was Bob Marley, or Ziggy, or Cypress, or Quest coming from the tree line. Blue and red lights flashed through the smoke and the crowd.

Riot police stormed the stage, the field, the concession stands, knocking down speakers, instruments, the PA. Helicopters swarmed overhead, spotlighting everybody and nobody in the middle of the afternoon. Concussion grenades and tear gas flooded into the heart of Auditorium Shores. They landed off to the side, and I heard Nirvana like never before.

We ran in any direction from the gas, the police, the deafness in our ears, into high concentrations of smoke we could only wish wasn't a form of riot control. Shields covered the exits. Batons, nightsticks, helmets, riot guns. Weapons we had only seen on TV during Occupy or protests in the 60s flashed every which way and people went down hard. Some of us stood our ground, others just wanted to get away. Fire and smoke swallowed Auditorium Shores whole.

A lot of people were bloodied, holding hands to their faces to stop something they never knew had happened. The ringing in my ears reached a high fever pitch. I held Rachel's hand and ran in the direction of downtown Austin, toward the buildings, away from the smoke and the screams I couldn't hear. The stage whispered an empty buzz as we ran past, dodging people or police, barely holding on to each other.

The smoke thinned the further we ran. Noise finally returned and behind us sounded off a battlefield, a war zone—just in front of us we heard the water. Rachel and I came to the edge of the field and the drop-off to the Colorado River.

Riot police came closer. The helicopter hovered overhead.

We would jump if we had to.