

Let's Roll

After the surreal shock of days in which we attempted to adjust to life in a makeshift war zone, the neighborhood cordoned off so that rescue could be attempted, the rush of fighter jets overhead to protect us from another attack that never came, the perpetual cry of sirens and then, the endless rattle of trucks hauling debris up Sixth Avenue, when we could barely breathe through the fumes of burnt bodies, charred metal, chemicals, ash, and fear, we tiptoed back into the now irrelevant routines of our former lives, alternatively discussing plans to get the fuck out of the City and how this is the end of life as we know it.

We take subways guarded by soldiers holding automatic weapons, first to work and then to meet in bars stacked six deep with the thirsty and the lonely, where we try not to talk about what it was like to watch people jump to their deaths while the Towers burned. Instead, we smoke and drink and discuss everything that now is dead: humor, irony, God, capitalism, America.

Firemen drag themselves in, weighed down by all their gear and by all that they have seen. We trip over ourselves to buy them drinks and to eke out a, "Thank you," keeping an awed, respectful distance from them as they contemplate their beverages in a stupor. Back at our tables we play our part in spreading the nascent urban legends that have begun to circulate, like that dog tags are no longer enough in their line of work: now they write their ID in permanent ink on their upper and lower extremities, just in case.

A birthday party will be a weird but welcome attempt at distraction from this treadmill of anxiety, futility, and nihilism. After all, life must go on: it's patriotic. Like most weekends in my otherwise ambitious, indulgent, successful, self-centered, and, mostly happy mid-20s existence, this weekend there are two. The first is on the Friday after at Botanica, a grungy basement bar with beer-soaked couches and excellent music on Houston and Mulberry, where I arrive to find the birthday girl and her boyfriend high on Ecstasy, the peals of their laughter competing with the jukebox's bumping baselines.

Paul, a broadly smiling co-worker of the birthday girl, chats me up with his review of Jon Stewart's post 9/11 monologue, saying how he thinks it's OK to be funny again and for us all to relax a little bit. Then he slides a tab of E into my hand.

"Do you want to roll here or go someplace a little more ... comfortable?" he asks, dark eyes with a glint and pupils wide, sliding an arm around my waist and pulling me towards him. I look at the birthday girl and her boyfriend, beaming with a happiness I haven't seen anyone emanate since before.

I'm desperate to feel that, or anything other than what I have been: a mash-up of numbness, hyper-alertness, disbelief, dread, and despair.

"Whatever you think," I tell Paul, totally willing to put myself into his hands in the hopes that this, or any experience, can transform me out of this walking, waking zombie state of surreality.

Paul and I take half a tab each in the bathroom of the bar and then decide we'll walk back to my apartment, across Houston and up Sixth, to continue our trip. Paul gives me the Ecstasy to stash in my cleavage for the walk home, just in case. We climb out of the bar, up the stairs on to Houston, holding hands, anticipating how we'll feel when the drug hits. As we begin the walk west, I lose track of what Paul is talking about, struck by how deathly quiet the city is, how even though I know people are out, and have been out every night since, people aren't out in the way they used to be out.

The streets are empty, there is no traffic, you have your pick of empty taxis to hail. There is no music playing, there are no conversations to overhear – the absence of the urban hum and hustle that defines the City has become the silent soundtrack accompanying Paul's chatter and the click of our stride on the pavement, my short legs in knee-high boots lagging behind his tall gait.

There is a cop posted on every corner and Paul makes sure to smile and nod each time we pass one. I avert my eyes, conscious of the drugs stashed in my bra, until I realize that I could have walked down the street tossing packages of party favors left and right and no one would have noticed. The boys in blue on permanent vigil, propped up against fire hydrants and fences and gated shop windows, have been told to be on the lookout for bombs and terrorists and airplanes flying directly into skyscrapers. There is no glory in bothering with flagrant drug possession in the Village.

As we approach my street somehow we are not yet high. Before we round the corner onto 13th I show Paul what was once my favorite view: the Empire State Building to the north and where the Twin Towers used to stand to the south. I lament the loss of this iconic New York skyline that I would stop and savor when I exited my building every morning. I tell him how on the day, I waited as long as I could to go outside and actually watch it all happening in real life, how watching what was happening a few miles down the street on TV made it all seem like it was occurring on another planet, or not at all. That when I did go outside and smelled and felt and saw and heard everything, there was no denying the magnitude of the horror. And then there were the posters. The endless, heartbreaking posters seeking information about the missing that were plastered across every inch of my neighborhood. They went up as fast as the Towers came down, and they stayed up – were still up – even now, when those being sought had long since been determined to have been vaporized and disappeared.

Dead sober now, we go up to my apartment and make a date to roll again together another time. We stay up all night talking on my couch about what the fuck really is going on in the world, how

weird and scary it all is. There is something cathartic about this conversation, and the honest rush of telling each other that this is what is.

Except that I am haunted by the images of the dead and the missing, but I don't tell him that.

We fool around but it is nothing significant. Mostly it is just nice to have someone here all through the night. The nights have been the hardest. The eerie absence of the comforting, constant, jangling, beeping, jarringly loud Manhattan sounds broken by the occasional searing roar of a fighter jet. The half-drugged sleep. The TV replaying and reinterpreting images of what I never wanted to see once, let alone on a loop. Perpetual uncertainty. Call another friend and rehash the same, "What the fuck?" conversation. Smoke another pack of cigarettes. Stare out the window. Wait for the sun to rise as some sort of reassurance of normalcy. Repeat.

Saturday night's birthday party is for a friend and colleague. Her party is at a bar in Soho that promises to be light on drugs but heavy on expat bachelors. I do a few bumps of coke before I head out, hoping for a jolt of the superwoman effect it usually provides. On arrival, I walk right into Russell, a British writer, and his guest, a tall, sandy haired, jocular English pilot.

A PILOT.

Pilots are for women what stewardesses are for men: high on the hit list of aspirational one-night stands. In the dark bar, chatting above the music, we only cover the basics: pilot, British Airways, I used to live in London, one night layover – and soon we are canoodling in a banquette and I practically have forgotten where I am, what day it is, and that I am supposed to be at my friend Jordan's friend's Doug's band's show at a bar on West 3rd very soon.

In the past I have had a habit of bailing on Jordan at the last minute, often because I have met a piece of man candy such as this. Jordan, who by now has left a million messages on my Star-Tac reminding me about the gig and wondering where I am. But now, it is understood that all commitments must be honored. Just in case.

I tell the pilot in a voice hoarse from too much talking over too loud music, too many cigarettes and not enough sleep, that my presence is required elsewhere, but I hope he will come with me as we are not nearly finished getting to know each other yet.

He announces, "I'm on the job, mate!" to Russell and we are holding hands and out the door, on the street and into a cab, kissing and smiling and in between smacks of our lips I quickly fill him in on

where we're going and what we're doing, assure him that we only have to stay for her friend's band's set, and then we are on our own.

Inside the bar it's all electric guitar feedback and sticky floors and torn jeans and unintelligible lyrics, and average music that is a rich Jewish boy's avocation, but Jordan loves Doug so I will love him too. The pilot is somewhere between bewildered and bored as I make the necessary rounds and introductions, promising him more fun later. Listening to the band, Jordan has her arm around me and I hold the pilot's hand from behind. She kisses me on the cheek, tells me she loves me and that she's so glad I came. Jordan doesn't know that I took E last night and am on coke tonight. These are the things I don't tell her.

As soon as we can, the pilot and I leave. We grab another taxi to save time, barreling up Sixth, anxious to unleash ourselves on each other. Upstairs in bed, in between rounds, I express concern about keeping him up all night when he has to fly back to England the next day. He tells me not to worry. "The pilots take turns having a kip while we're over the Atlantic," he explains. I am aghast.

"You NAP while you're flying across the ocean? Even now?"

"Well, now we're bolted into the cockpit. No one knows what we're doing in there."

"Since you brought that up," I begin, commencing the least sexy pillow talk of all time, "Um, how are you doing, you know, now, with everything? What's it like to fly?"

In the classic English way, he manages to evade my question. Had it not been the middle of the night and had we not been indoors, surely he would've begun talking about the weather. He tries to portray bravado, recalling his days in the RAF, then just goes direct and suggests that we resume shagging.

Except that he cannot. As voracious as he had been earlier is as bumbling and discomfited as he is now. He is mortified.

I take him into my arms and assure him that it's alright, attempting to make light by saying that now he can get some sleep and won't have to nap mid-flight. He sort of laughs and then closes his eyes, all the color draining from his face. He pulls me in towards his chest and I rest my head there. Too

wired to sleep, I listen to the rhythm of his heart beat and count the seconds in between, grateful to enjoy a momentary reprieve from the sounds of annihilation and their aftermath.

by Emily Lauren Burg
COL 1996