

5. HOLIDAYS AND HOLY DAYS

When you live on multiple planes of reality, it sometimes helpful to resolve the ambiguity. I am thankful that Amy did not accompany Brenda and me to Brenda's place. The situation was already bizarre enough without adding our local neighborhood voyeur. But we are all raised to be fans.

I had intended to return to Atlanta. I have earned enough money for school even though I am actually having second thoughts about going back to college. But Brenda wants to encourage me to hang out for the Chicago Independent Arts Festival. Jimmy has his idea about the whole thing.

"It's all the musicians who can't make it in the real world. And now they're trying to lean on each other for support."

I tell him, "That doesn't sound like a bad idea. I mean where are the A&R guys who are beating down your door?"

"You've seen the scuff marks on my door," he says in jest. "After all, there's no used crying over spilt milk. That's not what I call music."

Brenda encourages me to stay.

I am more than surprised how hot it is. My uncle doesn't have air conditioning. I hate trudging up the final floor in his apartment with the realization that I'm going to be hit by the most evil heat. I just can't take it.

I know it's going to be boiling hot at the festival. I have to prepare myself in the morning for the coming furnace. I drink water and eat light. I don't want to get sick while I'm watching the bands.

I have heard about festivals where the you get stuck in line for an hour just trying to get in the gate. I am prepared for just this eventuality. I take the EL down to the event. When I get there, I am surprised just how many people are getting off the train. But everyone is so well behaved. And things move so orderly. When I get to the gate, we hand in our tickets to the workers. Then we are waved through. Everything is so automatic. There are no grand criminal searches. One minute we're at the entrance, and the thing you know, we are in the site.

Brenda has told me that she is going to come a little later. It's not really Jimmy's cup of tea. And Flood doesn't want to spring for the 45 dollar admission fee. So I'm on my own. This is the indie fan's dream. A picnic to our lifestyle in the park.

You can see kids swimming in the park pool just next door. The pool is just outside the area that has been fenced in for the festival. A smart thing to let them swim on this sweltering day.

I am a little late getting to the site. I miss a couple of bands. On the Gemini Stage, Chicago's Oh Well, Maybe is setting up. They are a product of the Chicago experimental art wave scene. But they are much more melodic than other similar acts. That is why they fit in well at the festival. It is pretty crowded near the stage. Nowhere is there any shade, unless I head way to the back near the trees. Then I can barely see the stage. Everyone is so sedentary there with blankets spread out. Hardly the place to see a band. How do you dance lying down?

I can already feel the sun beating on my neck. I find a good place to stand. There are not too many people near me. I've got a good view. The percussionist for the band has this great

timbrel sense. He alternates these ringing tones with these dull thuds. He seems to mix Latin and African beats with insistent industrial attacks. The singer weaves his voice around these rhythmic lines. At the same time, they have these very insistent rock riffs that makes the music very palatable.

They play the song that they are best known for “Better Late than Never”. Everyone near the stage jumps up and down. There is such a feeling of camaraderie in us all. For the time being, we forget about the heat.

The Swedish singer songwriter Jen Leckman is on the Mercury Stage. We all rush over there to hear him. His band is a composed of girls all in white dresses. It is such a spectacle. They have such a feel of the girl groups of the sixties. At the same time, the large band has the sounds a little like Belle and Sebastian.

It is so weird. We watch new bands to experience different sensations, to break the routine. But then we try to classify our feeling. Compare one band to another. Break everything down to influences and trends. It is just like Brenda’s idea of men as carnivores.

As the day lingers on, there is more and more trash strewn around us. I have tried to do my part by not tossing anything on the ground. But to really help, we’d all have to start picking up things right now, even if we didn’t throw them there ourselves. Someone is going to do it when it’s all over. The festival can brag about the contribution that they are making to recycling. That’s great. But I’m not going to do any more than I can to help.

I feel helpless about it all. We all have such great intentions. But the world is moving on so much past us. All we can do is buy another t-shirt with a slogan. We’re being incited to become even more consumers than we already are. Otherwise, we’ll get left out in the race for the newest CD and the best hair and the most with-it attitude. I am swimming in sea of mud. Hose me off!

Sure, I’ve made a pile of money this summer. But how long will it last? Where is the future in any of this? I am waiting for the revelation.

Brenda shows up just as the National are about to play. I had been walking round earlier and eavesdropped on a conversation.

The first guy is such an eager fan, “They’re not going to play the “The Geese of Beverly Road“

His friend asks, ”How do you know?”

“They showed me the set list.”

I tell Brenda. She is a little disappointed. “I guess they want to be upbeat.”

“Can the National really be upbeat?” We both smile. We love their sense of wry wit.

“Secret Meeting” starts with such a gentle introduction. One guitar plays this undulating line. The other contrasts these ringing stones. The lyrics are insistent with an odd sense of frustration: “I had a secret meeting in the basement of my brain.” Matt Berninger puts his whole body into his performance. Tall and lanky, he seems to lean over the entire stage. The tension of the song builds gradually, “This river is full of sharks.” When the group plays “Mr November”, the building tensions explode. Matt’s delivery erupts, “I won’t fuck us over, I’m Mr. November.” The hero of the song, the “new blueblood,” has been exposed in his false bravado. This irony tinges all their songs. For me it brings back such memories of seeing them before. It is fast becoming the soundtrack of my life.

Brenda and I are amazed at the performance. I give her a big hug. Everything is still uncertain between us. But we share this wonder.

She tells me, "Let's leave after the Futureheads."

It has been a long day for me. I can feel the effects of the sun. Despite all the preparation, there is a slight burn on my neck.

I ask her, "Do you want something to drink?"

"Just get me a water."

When I come back, the Futureheads are just getting ready to play. The sun is slowly going down.

The heat dissipates slowly. It is definitely going to be a hot night. With their hits like "A to B" and Kate Bush's "The Hounds of Love", they are a lively climax for the first day. Barry's delivery is defiant. Ross adds his own urgency to the equation. And the guitars are cutting and energetic. We leave the park grounds singing "Skip to the End" over and over again. This Sunderland quartet has come to the States to shake us up. Often compared to the Gang of Four, they have found home in our hearts. They prove that lyrics can be intelligent analyses of everyday conversations and still be catchy. Futureheads, Futureheads, Futureheads.

Jimmy wants to meet us for our post-festival discussion at the Pyramid Lounge. I tell Brenda that I need to get something to eat. We take the EL to Wicker Park. We get some food at Earwax. I get a big salad and some pasta. She orders the pizza. Since I have been out much longer than she has, I am very much in a daze.

I begin to share some of my misgivings about the festival. I talk about walking through the piles of trash. I share my overall feelings of helplessness.

"If we could have all got together and done something real."

Brenda contradicts me, "It is something very real. The festival is such a change from anything that's happened before. It was this cooperative thing with the Parks District and the community. There weren't giant billboards for corporate sponsorships."

"There were still VIPs. There was still a star system. They had security there to protect the bands from their fans."

She works to be very reasonable in her argument, "You have security issues that you have to take care. The city is going to want some kind of insurance if you put on an event. It's not like that Messiah is leading us through a field in the wilderness. You have to be practical."

I am coming alive with our discussion, "I'm trying to sympathize. But how does it prevent the destruction in the world. Those in power don't feel threatened in the least by this kind of thing. It just dilutes any social protest. Maybe we just need to mutiny together."

"It's not as if we're all together on a giant ship and all we have to do is overthrow the captain. You're the one who's carrying on the star system. You want a miracle. You want this one perfect moment that is going to make you feel complete. Otherwise, you feel paralyzed. You don't do a thing." In some ways she is right. I am still immersed in the Messiah complex. And I am waiting.

She continues, "You're not really about indie. You want celebrity, and then you pretend to shun it. Come on, kid. Admit it!"

I think that is also the problem between us. I am drawn to that magical moment. And I haven't felt it between us. She hasn't become my angel. I don't know what it is. I find her

attractive. We get along so well. It is as if she knows me too well. Or she isn't willing to play the star for our performance.

After eating, we walk across the street to Pyramid Lounge to meet Jimmy. He's agreed to tone down for the night.

Brenda tells us, "I want to go dancing!"

Even though I have perked up, I am pretty dead from the daytime. "I'm going to need some coffee before I do anything." I get a coffee as we sit talking.

Jimmy asks, "Did you see anything fantastic today?"

"Futureheads were great. So were the National."

He says, "I've heard a few cuts by the National. I really dig their attitude. They create this persona of the dashing guy who's in way about his head."

Brenda teases him, "Sort of like you, Jimmy"

He tosses his hair and orders another drink. He is resisting her. Even though Brenda and I get on so well together, Jimmy is right. She still wants him.

We go to a dance club. It's a rock night. There's a nice mix of indie rock and dance hits. Brenda is trying to interest Jimmy to get on the floor. He is doing his Mick Jagger thing. She is warming up to his moves.

I am not too far from him. There are these two stylish girls dancing near me. They have this total nonchalance about their attitude. They know every break in the songs. And their bodies act with precision to the changes. They play the part of the hyperactive robot. But there is also something very sensual about their movement. They display their desire on the dance floor. I feel this sense of sweetness dancing next to them. Like eating candy floss. I am getting kick out of this. I am acting out my attraction for Brenda. Something about these girls appeals to me in their immediacy. Brenda seems so hesitant. She will never throw herself into the dance. She is far too calculated.

They play a Blondie song. The two girls are involved in what seems like a dance routine. I react with a similar verve. I feel that they have included me in their dance. It is such a trip for me. Brenda is lagging behind. I want to bring her along. But Jimmy is doing just that for me.

By the time that I make it back to my uncle's, I am totally wiped out. The blast of heat hits me as I walk up the stairs. It hangs on until I make it to the fan by my bed. I am still overwhelmed.

I splash some water on my face and let it air dry. It temporarily makes me feel cool. I slip into unconsciousness.

The next day I have barely recovered. It is time to get ready for the festival. Today, I will try to avoid the hot sun. I have a slight burn from the first day.

C-Lapse is going to play at 1. I want to catch their set. I take a cold shower. My aunt and uncle have gone out. Maybe to church. I have a small breakfast, a couple of bagels. Then I get ready to take off.

Brenda wants to meet me for Liars.

When I get to the site, there is a line. I am a little surprised. Everything was so orderly the day before. People are passing out promotional material. Then the line starts to move. We are finally making our way in.

C-Lapse gives this amazing set. They are very much post-Radiohead electro-rock thing.

Their hit “You’ve Got Me Begging Back” is this great mix of rock riffs with a pumping bass beat. They break it down to this percolating synth riff. The bass comes back in. And then everyone is in the air. “You’re loving me makes me know what pretend used to be.”

C-Lapse is a little taste treat to begin the day. After the show, I retreat to the trees for some temporary respite. Then I head over to the Mercury Stage for The Cold War Kids. They are this energetic group from Los Angeles. The music is sprinkled with dashes of blues. Nathan is the singer. He puts on the face of each character that he sings about. An alcoholic trying to make up with his family. A desperate man on death row. “Old St. John on death row, he’s just waiting for a pardon.” Or the bleak life of “Hospital Beds”. The guitar player is beating a rhythm on a Pellegrino water bottle. The bass player aggressively lumbers around the stage. He crashes into Nathan and then the guitar player. They love his rhythmic bashing.

I look at a guy by the side of the stage. He is responding to the latest song. He has seen them before and knows the lyrics. We are all part of this celebration. After Cold War Kids, it is Montreal’s Islands. It seems as if there are just too many people on stage. That is their charm. Goofy little lines from the horn players intersect with guitar washes and funky bass lines. I am digging the playful interchange. The singer from Islands used to be a member of the Unicorns. He entertains the crowd with biting comments between songs. “If I knew that Chicago was going to be this cold, I would have brought my winter coat.” They finish the set with the tasty “Diamonds”. I digest the tasty hooks.

Liars are making themselves ready on the Mercury Stage. The singer has an air of impatience. He hates the heat. His long hair and sharp features bring an air of madness to his performance. The weaving of the percussion adds to the howling guitar sounds. The music seems to breathe like some kind of escaped creature. The singer is even more crazed with all the action. The drummer’s eyes are in the back of his head.

Brenda has been working her way over to me since the band started. She kisses my cheek when she makes it next to me. I squeeze her hand.

We shake our fists at the band “Fly, fly, the devil’s in your eye, shoot, shoot.”

Line in Delphi follow Liars. This is the genius of the programmers. Line in Delphi are country-based. But they have heard their My Morning Jacket and Kings of Leon. They rock with the best of them. Their singer is Jason Carlson. He has a little of that outlaw thing. His guitar player Barry combines an Oasis sensibility with the anarchy of Sonic Youth. A real departure. When they play the well-known, “You’ve Never Looked Better,” the audience has been won over to their sound.

We are back at the Mercury Stage to see Art Brut. They have carried the rock star joke to the hilt. That is their humor. “We formed a band!” They incite everyone to start the indie revolution for himself. There is this lovely mix of the suave Brit with the totally frustrated clumsy adolescent. Nothing is immune from singer Eddie Argos’s self-deprecating humor. A feckless teen tries to perform for his unimpressed lover, “I think I can, I think I can, I think I can.” He will not get over this performance anxiety. Brenda is in stitches laughing. I am not sure what to think of her reaction. I may be me experiencing that same embarrassment some time in the future.

I look around me at all the people watching these bands. So many people who are just like me. We have all been searching for this place where we can all hang out together. And now

we are part of something bigger than all of us. Here we are; we finally have an identity. We are all alike.

The final band that we plan to see is Mission of Burma. It is a true celebration. We have escaped from our prison. I want Mission of Burma to impress me. I really can't believe that they have it after all these years. They broke on the Boston scene in the late 70's. By the early 80's they were already a force in the national punk scene. They were like a number of bands that were not stait-jacketed by the genre. They used punk as a platform as to explore the sonic possibilities of guitar, bass, and drums. To this mix, they added tape loops and really shook things up.

The set is the most amazing experience. From the beginning Roger Miller shakes his guitar around to eke out these unusual sounds. His vocals are eerie in their appeal. Clint Conley is wicked on the bass. He still sings with same urgency as those early years. And the drums explode with all the certainty to assert crisp statements full of power. Unambiguous confidence. It is wild as all these indie kids scream, "That's when I reach for my revolver."

As we walk from the park, I look back on an uplifting weekend. But I still feel out of place. The festival has taken this thing that was once wild and dangerous, and transformed it into something that is safe and digestible. Perfect couples can saunter in late and catch the heat from an approachable distance. They can purchase these clearly-defined moments from the festival headliner as if they are purchasing an end table for the living room. For my part, I'm not sure if Brenda still burns a torch for Jimmy. Or am I attracted to the sunny dancers from last night?

Brenda reminds me, "You have to make do with what you get. You still want that flash of light to knock you down on the sidewalk. It's simply not going to happen like that."

I am still dreaming about Apollo rescuing me with his chariot. It's going to be a terribly bleak life without such deft revelations. That is why I accustom myself to the darkness. This is where even the faint light appears bright.

There is an after festival party at a bar not far from the park. I walk over there with Brenda. I need a drink just to stay awake.

I point out all the people working at the bar to Brenda. "Look at everyone here. They have a much harder look than the kids at the festival. It's as if they resent that softness that indie seems to engender. "

"You just seem so critical of everything," she tells me.

"No, really. Do you really think that they would have liked the festival?"

She suggests, "Maybe they didn't have the money to spend. There could be a host of reasons why they weren't there."

I offer her my view, "They are more desperate about their lives. They want to see some thing more immediate. Like something that marks the skin."

"What do you mean?"

"It's not enough to have the belief," I tell her. "They have to feel the nails pierce the skin."

Brenda points over to the door, "Do you see who that is?"

I am not sure what she is telling me."

She points again, "Look over there."

"Wow, it's Jason from Line in Delphi."

I walk over to him. “Great set, Jason.”

“Thanks, man. Sorry, if I seem distracted. I am supposed to meet some people here”.
I start to walk off.

“Dude, stick around. The fireworks are just getting started.”

Some friends told Jason to meet him here so they could give him a ride back to hotel.
Fortunately for us, Brenda has driven here. Jason comes over to hang out at our table.

Brenda tells him, “I’ll give you a ride if your friends don’t show.”

We get Jason to tell us about his experience at the festival, “I had a great time. I was afraid that these snooty kids would hate us. It was tough coming after Liars.”

Brenda complements him. “I showed up because I’m a big Liars fan. But your set was totally amazing.”

Jason comments, “I’m not sure where we fit. Sure, we like county. But we’re not really a country band.”

I add, “You were one of the best things at the festival. You were totally original.”

We get talking about how I learned how to help Luke mix bands at Echo Lounge.

He tells me, “You’ve got to come visit me in Nashville. I can show you some things.

I tell him about the disaster that happened when I went to LA.

“We’ll take care of you. We will!”

Jason’s friends don’t show. He makes a call to his manager.

“I have to get back to the hotel. “

Brenda asks him, “Do you want to go dancing with us?”

“I’ve got an early call tomorrow. There’s some more dates on our tour.”

Brenda says, “I want to see you play again soon.”

“We’re going to come back to Chicago in November.”

“I can’t wait,” she tells him.

Brenda drives Jason back to the Ramada. Then we head to the Shore, this hip new dance club. C-Lapse are going to DJ. It’s going to be a blast.

When we get to the Shore, the guys from the band haven’t shown up. The local DJ is playing a lively mix of things. We get up and start to dance. Then C-Lapse show up. They are doing this techno-style set. It is very boring.

“Let’s get out of here.”

On the way out, this indie kid blocks my way.

“Get out of my way, you fucker,” I say.

He doesn’t move. Each time that I try to get around him, he moves to block me. This is getting nowhere. I plan to push him down. I push. It is glass. I have been watching myself all along. I have been walking into a mirror.

“Dumb fuck,” the door guy tells me. “The door is this way.”

Brenda drives me back to the house. I am sitting in her car. I touch her neck. She smiles. She reaches over to kiss me.

I can hardly ask her in to my uncle’s apartment. I feel that this is moving so fast now. I want her at this moment. I am just afraid that I won’t feel quite the same tomorrow. She gives me an escape route.

“The car is blocking traffic.”

There are no parking spots near here.

I tell her, "I'm going to be in town another few days. We have to get together."

I hate how my leaving Chicago gives me the perfect excuse to break it off. I can always come back for a visit.

I meet Jimmy the next night for farewell drinks,

Jimmy remarks, "I feel as if Chicago hasn't really shown you the good time that you deserve."

"I've had my fun," I tell him.

"You try to hard to see the silver lining in things. Sometimes you have to get something real in return for all your efforts."

"Are you talking about Brenda?" I ask him.

"You won't think of things the same after you've been with her."

"That's what I'm afraid of, Jimmy. I already had this mess up in Memphis."

"You never know until you try. You live in your head too much. Let me get you a shot."

He is getting me good and drunk. I've been staring at this girl at the end of the bar. She sticks her tongue out at me.

I walk up to her. "I could show you other places where to stick that tongue of yours."

"My girl's in the bathroom," she tells us. "When she comes out, we're going to kick your ass."

I start laughing. She throws her drink at me.

"Jimmy, let's get out of here."

Jimmy says, "I'd say the fun is just starting."

As we are walking out. Jimmy says, "You started out all full of spirit. And then you chickened out. What is wrong with you?"

"I don't know." I tell him.

"You're trashed. You could have some fun and not feel guilty in the morning."

A rain storm starts as we head to the next bar. Power is out all around us. We sneak through the rain to find an area out of the affected grid. I try to wait it out. I can only hope that the power is on near my uncle's place.

When we finally complete our drunk fest, I give Jimmy a big hug.

"I'll be back, fucker."

He tells me, "Don't be getting too indie on me." I start laughing.

When I get back to my uncle's, the rain has subsided. I look around trying to figure out why the power is still out. There's an angry guy in the street.

"Hello!"

I answer back, "Hello. Nasty this power outage!"

"What the fuck are you looking at? The power failure is in the street. Not in the alleyway." He is protecting his gang territory.

I don't want to go back to the house. I wander around until the sun comes up. My aunt and uncle have survived a horrid night without so much as a fan.

I feel a little weird leaving the city. It has been my home for a couple of months. I have really enjoyed being here. It has been so different than Atlanta. My car has pretty well stayed in its parking space since I've been here.

Brenda agrees to meet me at the Pyramid Lounge. She wants to get a light snack to start off the evening. I've already eaten pizza at home so I am less hungry than she is. He excuses herself to go use the bathroom. The guy who is bussing the tables approaches me.

"I've seen you in here quite a bit. Hi, I'm Ryan"

I shake his hand. He always works his ass off. He leans over. "You got to see my new tattoo" It is a variation of one of Durer prints of the serpent that offers the forbidden fruit to Eve. The massive serpent is wrapped around the thick tree of knowledge. In Gothic lettering the tattoo says temptation.

"Ryan, that looks great."

I wonder what his temptation is. He's the one who's forced to ply his trade while the rest of us live it up. Maybe he is tempted to get another tattoo. To feel the touch of the needle against the skin.

Brenda and I talk about all these kids who've moved to Chicago for that counter-cultural dream. They work in restaurants or record stores so that they can get their piece of the indie dream. I note, "What they need is always one breath beyond their reach. Work keeps them in a perpetual adolescence. They live in a crowded apartment and can afford enough for a few CD's and thrift store clothes. They've taken vows of poverty to their order of indie. In some cases, they'll never get enough for health insurance. And those lucky ones still will never be able to move into their own home. They're living their martyrdom."

Brenda notes, "There are ways out. They can get a job in design. Or go back to school. Maybe start a record label."

"But the competition is so fierce. They all sell to each other. The rate of return goes down."

"You're such a pessimist!" She stares at me.

"Then there's these kids who design loveable cartoon characters for chemical companies so they can celebrate the spread of birth defects to the developing world."

"Didn't some cabinet member once brag how other countries could afford to be more polluted than the US?"

"Yeah!"

We are really on the soapbox now. I am having that familiar fear of being poisoned where I sit. I feel as if I'm part of some kind of science experiment. And I am the guinea pig.

"They expose 100 men to poison chemicals. And only 3 have a chance of surviving past 35."

Brenda tells me, "I rented that movie last night."

"I can still smell the shit right now."

I am sitting in my living room. It is too comfortable, way too comfortable. My wife Brenda hands me a glass of wine.

"Don't you love the lamp that I picked up today?"

"Just make sure that Adam doesn't trip over the cord."

I know where Adam is. I'm not sure what Eve is doing. I feel tempted.

We head over to Brenda's place after we eat. The cartoon network is on. I am vaguely

watching it. She is a little tipsy. I am worn out.

“I’m going to miss you,” Brenda tells me.

I want to oblige. I am afraid to miss her. There is too much that I already miss. Too much that has gone away for good without any chance of coming back. Brenda brings me a glass of wine. I accept her hospitality.

She tells me, “You’re a hard guy to read. Sometimes you’re so warm. Other time I feel that we’re in the Arctic Circle.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve been having trouble concentrating. I have these flashes where I’m in a totally different life than the one that I’m in right now.”

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“I had this vision that we were married with two kids.”

“What were their names?”

“Adam and Eve.”

“That sounds like a nightmare not a premonition.”

It’s getting harder and harder to concentrate. She kisses me. I can taste the wine in her kisses. It is not that wine that I have been drinking. It is the more potent cocktail when her saliva mixes with alcohol. I feel as if I am entering her mind. She is on top of me on her couch. I don’t have much time.

I barely remember last night. We were groping in the dark. Then I woke up all ready to go.

Brenda offers a parting shot, “I still don’t understand you.”

“I don’t think that you’re supposed to.”

She adds, “You must have been exhausted to have fallen asleep like that.”

I am not sure what she means. I will see her again. I pack my car for the journey. For most of the trip, I think about Brenda. Then all of a sudden my attention shifts back to Hattie. It is as if I have never met Brenda.