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## Wasn't it a Party?

### Abstract

My brother said it's just withdrawal from the ecstasy. It's such a high, he told me, that a normal low is so far down it's like jumping off a building. Just don't do it too often, he said. You might rewire your brain and your normal will never be the same again. He told me this while he helped me look for the stolen painting last weekend. When I told my landlord the painting from the second floor stairwell was ripped off the wall at a party my roommate Sandra and I had thrown, I'd steeled myself to hear it was irreplaceable. But he told me he thought he'd bought the print from a vendor outside the Met, and if I wanted to make things right, I would find a copy, buy it, hang it, and we would pretend the whole thing never happened. I'm relieved that at least this one problem might have a solution, so this is my second weekend getting off the subway at 86th and Lex and hiking my way over to the Met in search of a replacement for the stolen print.

### Keywords

stolen, art, party, reality tv



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September 9, 2011

## Wasn't it a Party?

by Emily Doak

My brother said it's just withdrawal from the ecstasy. It's such a high, he told me, that a normal low is so far down it's like jumping off a building. Just don't do it too often, he said. You might rewire your brain and your normal will never be the same again. He told me this while he helped me look for the stolen painting last weekend. When I told my landlord the painting from the second floor stairwell was ripped off the wall at a party my roommate Sandra and I had thrown, I'd steeled myself to hear it was irreplaceable. But he told me he thought he'd bought the print from a vendor outside the Met, and if I wanted to make things right, I would find a copy, buy it, hang it, and we would pretend the whole thing never happened. I'm relieved that at least this one problem might have a solution, so this is my second weekend getting off the subway at 86th and Lex and hiking my way over to the Met in search of a replacement for the stolen print.

Most of the vendors were gone last weekend. Art Show up in Cold Springs, a man selling T-shirts told me. That was depressing. My brother had come with me and this cut our afternoon short. It was his last weekend in the

city — he'd gotten a job out west — and he had to return to his packing, so we got right back on the subway downtown and said goodbye when he transferred at Union Square.

His New York office never reopened after the eleventh. They invested in cleaning the air, but it took too long, almost a year, and the work had already moved to India. My brother's been depressed and he likes to talk about it, but sometimes, like last weekend, it feels more like he's warning me that we have some biological link as far as the blues are concerned. The guy thinks a lot about the wiring of his brain. And who knows, maybe he's right. Maybe I can't do anything about biology, but I can stop doing stimulants. I do have an addictive personality. I just wonder how people couldn't want everything, something, anything more.

But that's how I got in trouble with the party. An old arts school friend, Rhiannon, was taping a dating reality show the same night as the party and wanted to bring the cameras and some background players. I said sure, why not, bring it on.

\* \* \*

The part of the "jealous ex-girlfriend" was the first to arrive for Rhiannon's show. My roommate Sandra and I ran around shutting the overheads off, lighting candles, and apologizing — like we were still on our day job as *Law & Order* production assistants — for the lack of people, for the heat. It was the end of August and we lived on the third floor. We tried to entertain the ex, telling her how big our parties usually were and assuring her that people would start arriving soon. She took a seat on the couch and said, They better. She had to be back in Manhattan by midnight for an improv show. It had taken her an hour and a half out on the F, construction to Hoyt-Schermerhorn, and she couldn't be late for her curtain. She was waiting on her "ex-boyfriend" and his current "date," who in this little "reality" show happened to be my old arts school friend, Rhiannon, who was at that moment in a restaurant around the corner having a "romantic" dinner surrounded by three lightweight DV cameras. I was waiting on everyone I'd invited: the new guys from the bar and the old guys that nothing ever worked out with. And Caleb? There was no earthly hope of him arriving, but stuff happened at parties, so I always worked myself into a fit, anticipating. Hoping.

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Sandra and I had completed every pre-party step we could think of and were just milling around in front of our only guest.

Excuse me, the ex said, but I need to rehearse.

She got off the couch and turned herself to the corner of the living room where our kitchen table was pushed against the wall and Sandra's boombox perched among the bowls of snacks. Then the ex started yelling, gesticulating with her arms and cursing wildly towards our chips and salsa.

In the middle of this, our bell rang. It was a gaggle of hipsters. The leader had a decorative, rhinestone eye patch — pirate patches were all the rage in a small subset of the Village that summer. The hipster, who could only wish his eye had been heroically gouged from its socket, extended a weak handshake. Rhiannon invited us, he said. She isn't here yet?

He and his friends sauntered in and I shut the door, but it banged back open. I peeked outside. A whole chain of hipsters in eye patches climbed our stairwell. Holding the door open, they marched past me and continued, empty-fisted, to the kitchen where they filled their hands with drinks and came out to the chips. Sandra and I looked at one another. The jealous ex-girlfriend let out a final yelp and returned to the couch. Sorry, she said, but I had to prepare my vocal chords.

Sandra and I decided to go sit in her room where the only window unit in the apartment was cranked on high. We'd let our guests, whoever they were, sweat it out.

I shouldn't have invited Rhiannon, I told Sandra. I'm thinking this party was a horrible idea.

Come on, Sandra said, at least look like you're having a good time. She'd gotten out her camera. She was determined to finish her roll of film that night. There were pictures on it she'd been meaning to develop forever.

It's the best party ever, she directed me.

I cocked my head back and tried to laugh.

\* \* \*

I wander from artists' booths to tables with cheap silver rings to the guys without permits who have their stuff down on the sidewalk on black sheets they can ball up quickly if they have to run. A juggling clown on stilts is doing his show in front of the Met steps. He is incorporating a pair of metal mimes, who won't move out of his way, into his act. Silver mimes used to be all over the city, but they seem to have been replaced recently by a tarnished palette of copper, brass and tin.

It's hard to imagine the vendors haven't changed as well since my landlord bought the print, but he'd seemed optimistic I could find the picture here. It is of City Hall Park, but my landlord had to tell me this. When I called him to say it was gone, he tried to describe for me what it had looked like. I stood in the stairwell on my cordless phone, staring at the empty wall, but his words just couldn't bring it back for me. I walked by that picture at least two times a day for three years, but I can't remember.

\* \* \*

I do know this — we lost control of the party. They just kept coming, these look-at-me actor friends of Rhiannon's who wanted to be in the background of the lame cable access reality show she was shooting. They swarmed. It was a disaster. We ran out of beer because none of them brought any. Rhiannon finally blew through the party, had her staged fight with the jealous ex-girlfriend, and left to shoot a goodbye street scene with her fake date and the camera crew. But no one else would leave.

One camera guy not needed for the street goodbye confided to Sandra and me, We get about fifty-fifty, real ones and fakers who can't score an acting gig, but something's off with every single one of them. These guys, he said, aren't very good. When a guy takes out a bottle of Cheese Whiz at dinner and squirts it on all his food, it's just not believable. A little too cute. And that ex-girlfriend was a horrible actress. Where did they find her? Don't worry, though, he said. We'll salvage it with a little something called B-roll.

And to this he hiked his camera up on his shoulder, took a self-important swig off one of our last beers, handed the empty to Sandra, and walked into the crowd like some latter-day cowboy bound to save the day.

Some of the people I invited eventually showed up but the place was so

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crowded they stayed downstairs in the square of concrete inside our gate where a cute girl was mixing rum and cokes out of brown paper sacks. Upstairs we were soon to be dry, guests were acting out for the B-roll camera, and it was so hot I wanted to be downstairs, where I kept thinking I saw Caleb, but was of course always mistaken.

And then a guy with curlicue dreads I'd never seen before drops a 16oz Bud on the floor, and it explodes. That beer came through the door in a six pack belonging to a new friend who had some amount of etiquette and this guy takes it, drops it, and then tries to walk away like nothing happened here. So I call him on it and he turns around and calls me a white Brooklyn bitch, which I certainly didn't see coming. This guy is screaming at me in the middle of a puddle of domestic piss in my living room. And people are yelling at him, She's the hostess, man, show a little respect.

Sandra has gotten paper towels and she's down on the floor cleaning up his crap and I tell her, Stop!

Just let it go, she says.

No, you're going to clean this up, I scream at the guy and shove the empty beer can in his chest.

That's when he takes a swing at me.

\* \* \*

In one of the booths I've already paced back and forth in front of and discounted, I finally recognize something — the picture frames are the same as the one that was in the stairwell. Hung from pegboard, matching frames enclose the Brooklyn Bridge, the Flatiron, and an interesting angle of the Met that lets you see the glass roof of the Egyptian wing. Yellow leaves and black trunks obscure the front of one of the city's cathedrals. And there are the gas lamps of City Hall Park, but the print doesn't look quite right.

Do you have another one of the park? I ask the vendor, a small Asian man.

No. He slaps his hand against each of the individual prints on the display board above him. Downtown, City Park. Downtown, Brooklyn Bridge.

Central Park. What you want?

\* \* \*

I just wanted to forget about the whole, horrible event. So I popped the pill when it was offered and got so high I thought maybe the party had been a good time. I didn't notice until morning that the City Hall Park print and its anchoring bolt had been ripped out of the wall in the stairwell. Continuing downstairs, I saw the front of my apartment had been defaced with Cheese Whiz. The orange puffy lines had weathered a night dew and morning sun completely unscathed. Wiping that shit off the façade of my apartment house with a roll of cheap paper towels — the cheddar smell making me more nauseous than I already was — I'd never felt so down. Then later that afternoon we'd realize Sandra's camera was stolen and her undeveloped pictures — they were gone, too.

\* \* \*

I'm trying to replace a print that was stolen, I tell the vendor, but feel guilty like I'm the one who stole it. Is this the only picture of City Park you've ever sold?

Yes. No. No towers anymore. They went here, he says, sounding pissed off. Dumb thing to do. I could have sold for big bucks at one year memorial.

I see the empty patch of sky now in the corner of the print. It had been filled with a swatch of the World Trade Center in my landlord's version of the picture.

Could I get one with them back in?

Impossible, he says. The way it is now.

I give the vendor three twenties and he wraps the framed print in brown butcher paper. The landlord doesn't come by that often anyway. Maybe he won't notice that the upper left hand corner of his picture is just a patch of empty sky. It looks normal enough. I leave the tour groups and visitors and all the freaks trying to entertain them on the Met steps and walk as far east as I can to the river. Roosevelt Island sits out there, its own private, narrow entity, like a small child wading beside Manhattan in the East River. The



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south end, which I can't see from here, is a crumbling ruin. The middle is fully planned-out housing units that look a little like Battery Park City. Caleb went to Roosevelt Island once, just to go. I've never gone. I'd want to use the cable car and I don't know how. He said there were people in wheelchairs everywhere. He saw a guy with no legs inside a shopping cart, poling himself with a hockey stick down the middle of the street. I think of that sometimes, but more often I think of the kids when I think of the island. I remember kids playing on the grass that slopes down from the lighthouse on the northern point. When I lived in this part of town, Caleb and I used to come to the river and watch the kids across the water. Every time we came here the kids were playing, and we'd sit on a bench and watch them. It was just a single summer. They're still playing there today. He told me our kids would have a fifty percent chance of having green eyes, which meant my eyes, which meant our future. He said he was happy about that.

There had been expectations of a baby boom after the eleventh, but nine months have come and gone and nothing extraordinary happened. Things are back to normal they say. But I feel different and it's not just the ecstasy, not just biology like my brother has suggested. I almost got excited for the anniversary this week, for getting to feel so much again. I thought of staying home and having a little private party, ordering Chinese for lunch, and subjecting myself to the TV coverage, but instead I went to work. I'm not sure why. I have sick days.

I've got to go meet Sandra at B&H Photo now. She's only letting me pay for half the camera. I do wonder what was on the film she lost, but I haven't asked. It's gone now. Blank sky. I'll unwrap the print for her. See if she notices it's different. If not, I guess I'll have to let it be.

*Emily Doak's short stories have appeared or are forthcoming in The Gettysburg Review, Post Road Magazine, Inkwell, Isotope, Barrelhouse, Yemassee, and the Main Street Rag anthology, Altered States. She has also published poetry in The Spoon River Poetry Review and Rhino. She teaches writing at DePauw University in Greencastle, IN.*

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