

Spring Break, 1986
Paul and Eric Meet

On the way back to New York, Paul stopped in Providence. After an uneventful Saturday night, it so happened that the Grateful Dead rolled into town, and Paul wandered smack into Grateful Dead-land in Rhode Island. At first he was disgusted. *Look at these people*, he thought, *they're living in the past. Jerry Garcia isn't god, he's just a fat old rock and roll musician with a bad drug habit.* But as he wandered into the lot, he found himself thirsty for a beer when offered one, understanding immediately that this was a subculture marketplace.

“Ice cold imports and domestics.”

“Whatchyagot?”

“Domestic cans for a buck, import bottles for two.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah . . . say, you’re not a cop or nothin’, are you?”

“Nah. I just didn’t know you people did this.”

“Well, uh, yeah. We go from city to city to see the Dead. This covers our tickets and gas, y’know?” The kid was visibly uncomfortable, but there wasn’t anyone else to talk to at the moment.

“Yeah, I heard that’s what Deadheads do. I’ll take one of those green bottles.” He gave the kid two bucks and guzzled the beer. It tasted really good. “I’ll have another.” He gave the kid three bucks this time and said “Thank you” as he walked down the line. He’d skipped lunch and the beer hit him solidly. He wandered around the parking lot and viewed the Deadhead wares. Shifty looking dudes with long hair and tie dyes kept on offering him weed and “doses,” which he didn’t understand,

but guessed was some kind of drug. He bought a burrito and a cookie which he was assured did not contain drugs, both of which he enjoyed eating while leaning against someone's car and drinking a third beer.

A girl walked by holding six oversized balloons. She said the word "Nitrous" and hippies descended upon her, buying the balloons instantly. Paul was curious. He followed her to a van from which she was handed another six balloons. As she re-entered the main drag, he caught up with her.

"What's that?" He asked.

She looked at him, trying to gauge whether he was serious, or a cop, or what was going on. "Nitrous oxide. Like at the dentist. Laughing gas."

"I'll take one. I just inhale it, right?"

"Yeah . . ." she couldn't believe the stupid questions, *Is this guy for real?* "Listen, do yourself a favor, though, OK? Just sit down. Sometimes people black out and fall down, and you can hurt yourself that way. The gas isn't poisonous or anything, nonaddictive, even. But it's a big buzz, so just sit down, enjoy and relax."

"I'll do it with you, I was just going to get one for myself." A new guy had appeared next to Paul, five dollars in hand.

Paul took a quick look at the guy. He was tall and skinny, with reddish blond hair that hung to his shoulders. He had an intelligent look in his eye and a friendly smile. He might have even been vaguely familiar. "OK, cool, thanks."

The guy guided them to a spot between some cars, and he sat down on the ground leaning against a tire. He motioned Paul to sit

opposite of him.

“We should get at least seven pulls from these balloons, so we can just take our time. I chose this spot because those guys have a good sound system and are playing music for us to listen to. So, cheers!” He held up the balloon like he was toasting with it and proceeded to inhale deeply.

Paul followed suit. *Who is this guy? We haven't even introduced ourselves and he's acting like he's my buddy. It's cool, I guess. He seems nice. These people are all really nice to each other . . .* Then the gas kicked in. The stereo nearby blared “Low Rider” by War. Both would associate that song with this experience for the rest of their lives. Paul’s head spun and he heard the earth humming “Waaaah – Waaaah – Waaaah – Waaaah – Waaaah.” When he regained some degree of consciousness, he saw the guy grinning at him.

“Good gas, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess so . . . that was intense!”

“So, you’ve never done this before.” A question in the form of a statement.

“No, man, I’m just visiting Providence. I didn’t even know the Dead were playing here.”

“No shit. Well, cheers again!”

They just sat there for the next ten minutes or so, sucking the gas out of the balloons. Paul was disappointed when it was empty. He looked at the poor deflated thing crumpled in his palm.

“Well, that’s that, for now anyway. Hey, what’s your name?” The guy was getting up slowly, like an old man out of a rocking chair.

“Paul.”

“Nice to meet you, Paul. I’m Eric. I actually live near here, or my folks do. I go to school in Vermont, at Bennington.”

“I’m from Vail, Colorado, but I go to UC Boulder. I’m just touring the East instead of going on spring break in Florida.”

“Well, this is my annual spring break Grateful Dead road trip. I skipped school to go to three in Virginia, but this week we’re off, so I’m going to five more, three here and two in Hartford, then back to school.”

“Eight concerts? How many have you seen?”

“Uh, um, about sixty now.” He might have been exaggerating slightly.

“Holy shit. Yeah, we had last week off. I went to New York, Hartford, Boston, now here, and then I go back to Denver. I’ll miss a couple days of school, too. But I was just looking around. I’m thinking about moving to this part of the country when I graduate.”

“Huh? Most people move *to* Vail, but I guess if you grow up there it’s different.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“But you ski, right?”

“I used to ski competitively, then I blew up my knee. I did surgery and rehab, but I’m thinking more about snowboarding now.”

Eric nodded solemnly. He had seen snowboarders at Stratton and thought it looked like fun. “Cool. I’d like to try that. I love to ski. I’ve been to Colorado a couple of times; my family goes for Christmas.”

“Been to Vail?”

“Once. We thought it was really nice but kinda overpriced,” Eric

said somewhat sheepishly.

“You’re right, it is. We own the ski shop by Lion’s Head.”

“Oh, yeah! I know that one. I got a hat there. Say, you look kinda familiar.”

Paul looked at Eric carefully. “Y’know, I think I remember you, what two or three years ago?”

“Three.”

“Yeah . . . Didn’t you buy a fleece hat? We were, like, the first shop to carry hats made from that material. It’s good stuff.”

“That’s it! I still love that hat.”

They paused for a second to marvel at the coincidence.

“So, Paul, what are you going to do for the rest of the night?”

“Well, I wasn’t too impressed with the night life here last night. You guys here in this parking lot are more happening than the bars were on a Saturday night. Man, Boston was great. So many bars and so many girls.”

“You could go to the show.”

“I don’t have a ticket, and I don’t really want to.”

“If you have money, a ticket is not a problem.”

“Actually, I’m broke. I’ve been on the road and I’ve spent all of my dough.”

“Well, I’m about to take some incredible acid and go inside and watch the band and dance. I’ll get you in if you want me to.”

“What, you’ll buy me a ticket?”

Eric didn’t know why he was feeling so generous. It might have been the hit of Ecstasy he had taken; the balloon had been a diversion on

his way into the show. “Sure.”

“Wow, that’s really nice of you to offer, but, I’m gonna pass. Thanks, though.”

“Well, all right, then, I’m off to see the Dead. There’s a cool little dive bar on the block by the newspaper office on the other side of the civic center. I’ll be there with some friends later, if you want to stop by. The show is always over a little before midnight.”

Paul wandered around until it seemed like everyone had closed shop and gone into the show. Now he would have to buy some beers at either the liquor store or a bar. He was starving but he had little money and a big, but waning, buzz. That was all it took; he went into a nice restaurant with Dan’s credit card and ordered a steak. He kept the tab open and watched sports on TV.

Later Paul moved to what he thought was the dive bar that Eric had mentioned for a couple more and some pinball. Sure enough, at just after eleven thirty Eric came in with a group of attractive, if somewhat scruffy looking, kids.

“Hey, Paul, great to see you decided to check in. This is my buddy Fred, and this is Tim, Monica and Erin. We all go to Bennington together and are going to all of the shows I mentioned.”

“Spring break, nice one. How was the concert?”

“Killer. They played some of their rarer tunes, plus ‘Do It in the Road’ by the Beatles and everyone went nuts! They closed with ‘Not Fade Away’ and we kept the chant going for like twenty minutes, then the band came back onstage and played the song some more, then the Dylan tune ‘The Mighty Quinn.’”

Paul wasn't quite sure what he'd just heard, but he gathered it was good.

"But they didn't play the 'Box of Rain,'" Fred said, "that this lucky guy got to see in Hampton last week." He mussed up Eric's hair.

"Oh, they'll play it again, but it won't be the bust out that it was in Hampton."

Again Paul didn't quite get it. He watched them. Eric had said that he would take acid, but he didn't look like he wanted to jump from any buildings. He just smiled, and there was something about his eyes, *They're sparkling*, Paul thought, *They all look so happy. It's like they just got out from a big game that their team won.* He thought a little more. *But everyone in the room comes out feeling like that, instead of half the crowd being bummed that their team lost.*