

# BURNING MAN

a short story

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I've been to Burning Man twice and have never had sex there.

The first time I didn't have sex because I didn't go with my girlfriend. The second time I didn't because she came along.

If you've never been to Burning Man, I should make clear that going there means you are going to have sex. And drugs.

Not having either is like flunking Phys Ed in elementary school.

For the uninitiated, Burning Man is an annual temporary arts community which arises out of sheer willpower from the playa of the Black Rock Desert in a barren wasteland two and a half hours north of Reno, Nevada. There's nothing there until thirty thousand freaks from around the world descend on those plains to make it a walking techno-performance-art-sex-drugs-and-drum-circle-maze-of-human-aliveness.

It's also the third largest city in Nevada for the week.

My girlfriend, let's call her Meadow, came with me my second time there. We were helping create a 'ritual opera' based on some odd interpolation of Haitian voodoo mixed with early Hindu mythology.

Wasn't my idea. But it was something to do while there. And it got us free tickets, food and a tent.

My job was to create a series of initiations to put people through to prove themselves and earn the right to join our group. We built a pentagonal open-top hut (voodoo in design I was told) which we carpeted with remnants we found in Reno's finest back alley trash bins. Then I put the candidates through trust-building games and guided meditations from midnight 'til dawn.

Every night for a week I kept up this nocturnal schedule - initiating almost two hundred people who willingly subjected themselves to this torture. No drugs or stimulants were used. No animals were harmed. No sex was had, but people were stripped naked and made to endure the nearly freezing temperatures of the desert night. It made them huddle and become friends very quickly. Everyone was just looking for something to do and a group to be a part of. And when you work for it, somehow it means more. So I made'em work.

People also joined us because we supplied body paint for the performances so they could dance around essentially naked in the glow of burning sculptures to the moves Meadow had choreographed for them.

The 'opera' came to fruition on a frigid midnight the night before 'The Burn'. 'The Burn' is the last night when the powers-that-be (yes there are powers-that-be even at Burning Man) torch a sixty-foot tall wooden sculpture of a man. 'The Burn' over the years has turned into a Disney-esque spectacle complete with fireworks instead of the unruly Bacchanalian orgy it once was.

But our event was unsullied by the bureaucracy.

AND it was ART.

Because we said it was. HA!

There was running and dancing and making of music and wearing of symbolic body paint in well-researched designs. Of course, no one could see anything in the dark, so, should anyone have been able to decipher the Haitian iconography mixed with Sanskrit they were not afforded the opportunity. Nonetheless, five thousand people (quite sensibly dressed with hats and scarves) cheered us on as we cavorted about. They didn't have a clue that there was purpose to it all, but we burned things at the end, so everyone was happy.

The morning after our little show, it was the last day before everyone went home to clothes and jobs and trees and cars. Meadow and I had worked so hard the entire week we hadn't had time to enjoy the rest of the festival. So we found ourselves a plush and pleasantly cool tent that some Silicon Valley billionaire (back when there were still Silicon Valley billionaires) had brought from Morocco. It was eighty feet long and twenty feet wide and there was a light mist coming down onto us from sprinklers he'd installed above. Thanks. It was 75 degrees inside the tent and 115 outside. Sweet.

So we laid on these plush pillows - emerald and ruby and ivory - and we luxuriated.

"Now!" I thought, "was the perfect time for those 'shrooms."

I've never done much drugs. I hate the smoking and the shooting and the snorting, and I'd never done 'shrooms before, but I'd always liked the idea of getting high naturally. So I take out the little plastic baggie that I'd traded some guy for a gallon of water earlier in the week and it's just then that I realize I have NO idea how much of this to take. So I put a little in my mouth and wait to see what happens.

Nothing. So...I give a little to Meadow...

And then I take a little more, because I'm bigger, and, well, drugs don't really affect me all that much.

When I was younger I learned I have a very high tolerance to drugs. I had trouble falling asleep in high school - at night, not in the classes. I could fall asleep just fine then.

So I was given a prescription of L-Tryptophan which is supposed to make you drowsy. It did nothing for me in the recommended dosage, so...extremely frustrated, one morning around 3AM, I ate half the bottle. The pills in it - not the bottle itself. The bottle would have been bad for me. The pills on the other hand didn't so much as give me an upset stomach, much less put me to sleep.

But it seems the 'shrooms or the sun or just sheer exhaustion did send me napping that afternoon at Burning Man because the next thing I remember was gently waking after a pleasant rest and feeling my girlfriend lightly clawing at my chest, saying:

"I know we'll be OK if I can just get inside you."

Isn't she sweet?

"I know I'll be OK if I can just crawl inside your skin."

"Uh...Meadow, you're hurting me." Her nails dug in.

"I know we'll be fine if I can just get IN-SIDE your body! Everything's going to be ALRIGHT if I can just crawl inside you!"

At this point, the thought wafted over my head that I ought to ask her if she's feeling OK. But before the words came to my mouth, she leapt to her feet, pointed in the corner and yelled:

"Oh my God! There goes my spirit guide!!!"

Then she promptly collapsed.

I was not fazed. Living in California, I'd had a tendency to date women with made up names and spirit guides. This one had a guide who took the form of a mouse. She wouldn't tell me his name though. It was a secret between them. Why he was a mouse I never found out either. It didn't seem like a very powerful totem to me, but, then again, he wasn't my spirit guide.

After lying there musing about her guide for...I don't know how long, I realized she lay lifeless in a heap at my feet and I thought, "Someone really ought to do something to make sure she's OK."

Then I realized no one else was going to do anything. This was Burning Man and they didn't realize that this was not normal behavior. And it struck me, right then, that there wasn't anyone in the entire world who cared about her except for me.

She was completely my responsibility. Her health, her happiness, her security, her getting married and having children and living a perfect and fulfilled life. It was ALL up to me. So I did the only think I could think of doing.

"HEEEEEEEELP!!!!!!!"

I screamed at the top of my lungs and ran over to a group of topless women. Somehow all that managed to emerge from my mouth was a disturbing gurgling. When they didn't respond, I spotted an army of male belly dancers and lunged in their direction. They had great costumes. Really elaborate. I screamed something that was meant to alert them to the unfolding drama, but instead, a high pitched squeal emanated from my throat.

Progress, perhaps, but not what I was aiming for.

I tried crying out for a medic, but all I heard was my own voice laughing...really quite hysterically. I didn't see what was so funny though. My girlfriend must have overdosed and here we are in the desert two and a half hours north of Reno, Nevada and this is where she's going to die!! And I'd killed her!!!

And while things had been a bit on the rocks between us, I was hoping we could turn it around. Perhaps we'd get involved in some sort of Burning Man orgy. They had those here! I'd been told about them. That would enliven the relationship! Right? I, of course, in the openness of the entire event, was stupid enough to tell her about this desire and not only did sex cease to be an option for the rest off the time there, but in the moment she responded, her voice deepened and like the witch that transmogrifies into a lethal dragon, her grammatical skills were overpowered by her reptilian brain as she bellowed:

"No...Orgies...For...YOU!!!"

And although I was growing furious that her jealousy was reigning me in with the power of a steel-belted tether, and although she rejected me when I expressed my true authentic desires - which I must point out included her (as well as many other women). And although that rejection took the form of a silent refusal to copulate in any form...

That didn't mean I wanted her to die!!!

I dropped to my knees in front of her body and tried to remember CPR from my days as a Cub Scout. And thank the stars above, before I began, she leapt to her feet in one move and exclaimed:

"My God, that was so beautiful! You won't believe what just happened to me. My spirit guide took me to the underworld where he lead me across a deserted continent. I asked him 'Where are all the souls' and he declaimed:

'Back in the 19th Century, medical advances created an unprecedented population explosion in the Living Realm. We had to send up the souls of every human we could find. But still they needed more. So we started sending to Earth the souls of monkeys and dogs and rats and we put those into the newborn human babies...'

It explains a lot when you think about it.

'But there were still too many people being born so we sent out the souls of every salamander, every guppy and every weeping willow - until there was nothing left in the after-world at all!'"

As she recounted her journey in a torrent of sound, she took off all her clothes and began dancing and singing and giggling like a four year-old. She spun in circles, naked and giddy, when somehow, she floated off the ground!!! She was more beautiful than I'd ever known her to be and for the first time in my life, I wanted to be with her and no one else.

She looked down at me and started speaking poetry. She rhymed her way through her ecstatic journey, telling of how she was picked up by a metal bird and flown across the desert. How her mouse guide looked so cute, sitting on the nape of the bird's neck. "You could just tell he was finally at home, flying in the air."

She was dropped off at a cave where she was attacked by a ghoul. No worries. There was no struggle. He just lopped her head right off, took her body and boiled it in a huge cauldron. She assured me she'd been put back together, better than new, and that now she could see the fabric of all living things as she never had before. As few have ever seen before.

"Now I can look directly into your eyes and see if your soul is really, completely human."

Finally, gently, she floated to the earth.

She took my face in her hands and looked deep inside.

I'd never been penetrated like that before.

I don't know how long it lasted. Her eyes were so brown and timeless. I could say they were deep umber, but they were truly a simple puppy-dog brown.

I was powerless as she searched my soul.

She never told me what she saw. When she broke away she just said, "It's been quite a day and I could use a drink."

We lay down together. She laid her head on my chest, and she laid her hand on my heart and voice trembling joy, I heard:

"I love you sooo much. It's good to be home."

She faded away, tucked into the crook of my neck and we slept right through the Burning of the Man.

\* \* \* \* \*

She didn't remember the trip when she woke up the next morning. I had to remind her of the entire story. It was as though it happened to someone else. To this day, she thinks I made it up.

But I can't make up stories. Not like that. Not me.