

LITERARY FICTION

Euphoria ©

By Rachelle Bramly

The first thing I notice is the sweat. It sticks to my skin as I enter the building and weave through masses of people congregated by centre stage. The air is thick and dank, humidity formed by manic movement and human perspiration.

It's dark, save the pulsing of psychedelic patterns projected onto the concrete walls. A strobe light flares, and a burst of colour temporarily illuminates the room. For a moment, the illusion is broken. The warehouse is simply a warehouse—then darkness again. The lights oscillate as the speakers quake and the music reaches its climax. The crowd around me quivers, the fast-paced tempo reverberating through their bodies. They're experiencing something I can't quite grasp—not yet anyways. They're on a different level, in a different headspace.

After the climax, the breakdown is my favourite. Soft beats, spaced further and further apart, cradle the audience and deposit them back to earth with a gentle hand. The afterglow is palpable.

A teenage girl pushes past me. She pulls her friend behind her, their fingers intertwined, palms pressed together. The girl in front—smacking her gum with impressive speed—she's a veteran like me. She gives all the right signals of someone knowledgeable about being lifted. The roots of her hair are damp, her mascara moist and running, her bottom lip set in a determined line. A litany of plastic-beaded bracelets canvas her arms. She fishes a box of cigarettes from her bra. Camel Crush—typical. My eyes drift to her thighs, the appetizing gap of skin between the top of her tall socks and the bottom of her tutu.

The girl locks eyes with me. She's felt me staring. Her expression reads conflicted, a paradoxical concoction of *leave-me-the-fuck-alone* and *please-notice-me*. It's a challenge I'm willing to accept.

I can see the outlines of reddish-purple marks nibbling their way up the right side of her neck. Someone's already marked her as their territory.

The music changes and a new mixset begins. I follow the girls with my gaze as they march towards a heavy metal door, propped open with a cinder brick: the smoke pit.

I head towards the door. It's time to join the collective. I snake between dancers at an increasing speed, my heart pounding, anticipation gurgling inside of me. My body knows, my body remembers, and my body wants more.

It's time.

I slip out the exit and into the open air. Chain fences, seven feet in height, enclose us like livestock in a pen. Barbed wire prevents the curious from hopping over. Christmas lights decorate the fences. Outside, the music is faded: the echo of the bass still throbs, yet the finer details are lost.

I beeline to the outhouses. They stand in a neat row against the exterior wall of the building. I slide into one, allowing the door to thump closed behind me. I turn the lock and pull down my pants. Reaching into my boxers I extract, from under my balls, a small package I taped there earlier. Some might call me overly-cautious, but security can't pat you down everywhere—and at least I never get caught. Ripping the plastic open, I unearth two round, pressed pills. They look like candy. They are the size of Smarties, each sunshine yellow and emblazoned with a horseshoe. I shake the pills in my hand so the horseshoes face upright. Tonight, I'll take all the luck I can get.

I put the pills in my mouth, one at a time, and suck. They taste terrible, but it's part of the ritual. I sit on top of the toilet seat, pants still at my ankles, and my mouth fills with chemical acidity. The pills begin to disintegrate, turning to mush. I hold the drugs with my

tongue for as long as I can until it's too much, and I have to swallow. They burn all the way down and into my stomach.

I stand, pull my pants up, and exit the outhouse. Back in the night air, I scan the crowd and find the two girls collapsed together against the far fence. The girl in the tutu is rubbing her friend's forearm with intense, drug-induced vigour.

My stomach flip-flops.

I find somewhere to sit down. I'm familiar with what's happening; it happens every time. Nausea overruns my core and I feel queasy—sitting helps. I choose a spot with a clear view of the girls; their features are subdued by shadows. As I keep tabs on them, I take deep breaths. Inhale—hold—exhale at half the speed.

Hold again.

Repeat.

It's all part of the ritual.

A security guard shines a LED flashlight in my face. The illumination is jarring and temporarily blinds me.

“Everything okay here?” he barks.

I nod, struggling to regain my eyesight, and the security guard moves on. I watch him work his way down the line of people pressed up against the fences, asking the same question over and over again, each time in the same tone of voice. I wonder how much he is paid an hour. Enough to care if someone answered “no”?

I pull out a cigarette and light up, taking long, slow drags, the anxiety in my stomach subsiding.

I wait and I breathe.

Across the way, the first girl is laughing, brandishing her Camel Crush, her cheeks aglow. Her friend parrots her behaviour the best she can. A halo of light extends from each of their bodies in all directions. The drug is kicking in, colours swirling into emotions

swirling into patterns exploding in my body like fireworks—like that moment right before you come, directly before release.

The friend, the tag-a-long, gets up and wanders to the other side of the smoke pit, disappearing into a porta potty. The first girl looks after her, sitting with her back against the fence, sipping at her cigarette. I can't tear my gaze away from her. She is intoxicating.

The girl turns her head slightly and we lock eyes for a second time that night. I know I have no choice but to go to her.

I get up. I can feel my heart bellowing in my ears. The energy in my body seems to shoot upwards and out the crown of my head with the rushing of an upside-down waterfall. I feel weightless.

She reaches for me as I sit, hugging me with intimate passion. I love this drug because the walls we normally surround ourselves with melt away—not because we are “fucked up,” but because we are finally safe. In our euphoria, we can trust; we can let our guard down.

“I'm Starburst,” she says.

I stay silent.

“Give me your hand, come here.” The girl reaches out and makes a peace sign with her fingers. “We need to be properly acquainted.” I mimic her motion, pressing the tips of my index finger and middle finger against hers.

“Peace.”

She morphs her hand into half a heart. I do the same and again our fingers touch, creating the full shape.

“Love.”

Our fingers intercept, wrapping around each other, bonding tightly.

“Unity.”

She looks at the bracelets stacked up the length of her arm. Selecting one, she pulls it overtop the others, downwards towards

our hands. She stretches the elastic cords outwards and guides the bracelet over our clasping fingers onto my arm. The beads are yellow and orange. In the centre, a white bead shaped like a shooting star.

“Respect.” She looks up at me with a smile. It is complete. We are now forever linked. I feel bad I don’t have something to give her in return.

She smirks and teases.

“Dontcha know about PLUR?” She thinks I’m new here.

I lean up against her shoulder, my head rising and falling with the quickening of her breath. She smells musky and fragrant, all at the same time.

The girl leans back into me, bringing her cigarette to her lips for one final drag. We are now supporting each other with our weight. There exists nothing else but the heat between our shoulders—the way her breath catches when I move my mouth closer to her ear.

I need more.

I hug her close, her body melding with mine in dazzling delight. I am bound to her, every particle of her body a particle of my own. When she inhales, I inhale. When she exhales, I exhale too. We are one moving mass of bone and muscle; one creature, crafted from cartilage and sinews, curled in the darkness of a warehouse rave’s smoke pit.

I kiss her. Minty, menthol smoke still lingers in her mouth, and I suck it into mine. My tongue explodes into a fresh frenzy of sensation. The coolness burns and soothes, soothes and burns.

Her skin is soft. My fingers dance down her right arm and find her hand. I interlock my fingers with hers. The electricity between us is visceral. Real. Alive.

I reach her neck with my lips and pause, noticing once more the slither of bruises winding their way up towards her right ear. The

marks taunt me, and I think of whoever left them behind.

I want her to be mine.

My hand releases her hand and travels down her front, finding her *tutu*. The polyester tulle is rough against my fingers. I brush it aside. In between the warmth of her legs I find cotton panties and push those away too. Even before I touch her, I can sense her wetness. Then, I am up to my knuckles in her, getting to know her from the inside out.

Her body stiffens and I am pleased. Her body's movements sing to me. Her pleasure is my pleasure; in it, I find validation.

I realize all at once—almost not at all—that she is pushing my hand away; I don't understand and push back, once more plunging my fingers up into her. She grabs my wrist but loses her grip. I am stronger than her.

“No. Stop.”

Her words are hushed, and I don't believe she means them. I push harder. She tries to scramble backwards, only the fence is in the way. My fingers are still inside her and they're not ready to leave. I come closer, pressing my body against her. I can feel her sweat on my skin. I kiss her. She's not kissing back anymore.

I look at her, confused. This time her expression reads *panic*.

She catches me in my pause and throws herself sideways, twisting away from my grasp. I am confused because I just felt her—my fingers are still moist from her. I am confused because I thought I had felt her as surely as I feel myself, and yet—

She jumps to her feet, her head sweeping back and forward, scanning the crowd. She is looking for her friend. I stay seated on the ground and watch her feet scamper to my left, disappearing around me. I turn to watch her go and try to find her name in my mouth. Instead, I find it empty.

I don't understand.

Her presence hangs in the air with a ghostly permanence. I can still feel the outline of her body leaning against the chain metal fence. I reach out to try and touch her—but she's gone.

I sit on the concrete for a long time, fingering the girl's bracelet around my wrist, as I listen to the whirlwind of noisy chatter and pounding bass. The music hangs hazy in my mind: heavy, assaulting. The external world feels miles away, but it continues to intrude upon me, regardless of distance. I search for the girl in the tutu, the girl who let another deface her neck, but would not let me take her farther. I can't find her anywhere.

I am blinded once again by an LED flashlight. The security guard is back, having completed his circuit.

"Everything okay here?" he barks.

I shake my head; I am beginning to understand.

"No."