

Spring Break 1970

By Alice Graves

I sit scrunched between two frat guys and one ditzy education major in the backseat of a rusty blue Rambler, my feet teetering precariously on the hump, the snap of my jeans digging into my stomach, and sweat dripping under my bulky winter parka. But I don't care. All the way home I think about Eric. It is nearly a year since we broke up, and I want more than anything to see him over spring break, even though I am determined not to give him the satisfaction of even one phone call.

When I finally get dropped off at the exit ramp of the Long Island Expressway, I walk home slowly to get the blood flowing in my legs again, my green plaid suitcase bumping rhythmically against my legs. In ten days I will get picked up at exactly the same spot. I know I'll get the hump again. I'm always the smallest.

Tonight Queens smells of car exhaust and clouds, and the moonless sky threatens rain. I've gotten used to the whispering mountain air of Mohawk as I walk across campus to classes each morning. That is, when I go to classes. Lately I spend most of my time at the student union, listening to The Who blaring from the juke box, smoking cigarettes and playing endless games of Crazy Eights with whoever is around.

Last year I spent every minute of spring break with Eric. I was still in high school and Eric was in his first year of college. We spent afternoons at the Modern admiring the Henry Moores with their smoothly curved surfaces, or walking in the park and eating pizza at Tony and Joey's Primo Pizza on Jewel Avenue. Evenings we tuned to grainy old movies on the tiny black and white set in his room and made out. If his parents weren't home, we'd go all the way. On Easter Sunday we went to the Be-In at Central Park, where we chased a red Frisbee on the emerald lawn and I smiled as he placed a golden daffodil in my long brown hair. Take it from me. When life is too good to be true, it's too good to be true.

Eric dumped me so he could hitchhike to California. He said it was to find his true self, but he was always more into acid than introspection.

As I pass Eric's corner I peer up his block. The street is deserted except for the streetlamps casting a misty glow on the cars parked neatly along the curb. Looking up, I notice that Eric's bedroom window is dark. My legs go numb, I feel lightheaded, as if my veins were filled with water, and I wonder if this is what death feels like—this incredible loneliness and loss of all feeling.

When I get home, my mother is overjoyed to see me, even though all we ever do is fight. The apartment feels oppressively hot with the radiators working full steam. My stepfather, a man I hate and fear, watches Walter Cronkite in his boxers. I can smell meat being overcooked, and the windows are all shut and steamed over.

We sit down, the four of us. I look at my brother and all I can feel is pity. He's in ninth grade and doesn't give a damn. He wants to be a rock musician. "I like your hair," I tell him, searching for something nice to say. I know my parents never say anything nice to him. They never said anything nice to me.

He smiles, and runs his fingers through his golden brown Jewfro.

"He looks like a girl," my stepfather says.

I'm not very hungry so I only eat a baked potato but I load it with butter. The meat smells like it died a slow and painful death. Then I go to the phone. I have to get out.

Barb was in my English class senior year. Now she goes to the community college. We sit on her bed with the pink and white striped comforter and she tells me all about her new boyfriend. She is bouncy and bubbly and happier than I've ever seen her. She even likes school.

"Did you change your hair?" I ask.

"I lightened it. Do you like it?" She rotates her head, like the Breck girl, so I can get the full picture.

"Barb, you're getting so bourgeois." She takes this as a compliment.

Afterwards, I take a walk through the neighborhood. The air is thick and heavy, like a huge hand pressing on my head. Soon I am in front of April's house, sitting on a bench and looking up at her sixth floor windows. The kitchen light is on; that means her father is home.

I miss April even more than I miss Eric. April was my best friend all through junior high and high school. A few days after school ended, she packed up and moved to Santa Fe. She couldn't stand living alone with her father who never talked. All he seemed to do was sit in the living room and listen to Italian opera. Her mother had left home, gone to live with her boyfriend in Florida.

"At least you have a father who loves you," I told April, but it didn't comfort her.

I don't know why I didn't go with April. I seem to gravitate towards order in my life, and going to Santa Fe without any money and where I don't know anyone would surely be too chaotic for me. I chose instead one of the state colleges, the one farthest away from New York City, a mere 20 miles from the St. Lawrence River. Mohawk is alien to me in its own way. I am

used to subways and folk music, not keggers and snow in May.

The next afternoon it's drizzling when I walk to Sara's house. The misty air seems to open my pores and make my skin come alive. Sara's mom answers the door and warns that Sara has bronchitis, but she points the way to her room. I can hear Joni Mitchell singing "Both Sides Now," and I silently agree that love isn't all it's cracked up to be. Sara is sitting in her bed wearing a blue satin nightgown, smoking cigarettes and drinking cough medicine from a bottle. No spoon.

"It's prescription," she says. "It really gets me stoned. Want some?"

"Why are you smoking?" I ask, taking a cigarette from her pack.

She shrugs. "It's okay. The cough medicine keeps me from coughing."

"How's school?" I ask. She lights my cigarette with her lighter.

"I dropped out. I'm going to work at my father's store as soon as I feel well enough." Her father owns a furniture store.

"Want to go out? I think the rain stopped." I have a problem with claustrophobia. The window is shut, her room is smoky and it smells of sickness.

"I don't want to get dressed."

I sit on Sara's bed and finish my cigarette. She used to be a lot more fun when we were in high school. She painted delicate watercolors and played the guitar and the three of us—April, Sara, and I—tried to duplicate Joni's diaphanous voice. We rode the subway to Manhattan, balancing between the cars and smoking cigarettes, and we snuck into the Woody Guthrie Memorial Concert at Carnegie Hall without tickets.

Graduation seems to have destroyed us.

"Have you heard from April?" Sara asks.

"Yeah. She has some job pushing papers. I may go see her this summer."

"Tell her I said hi."

"Yeah," I say, crushing out the last of my smoke.

My mother offers to take me clothes shopping. I try to be on good behavior and not get into any public arguments with her. If I get mad I curse, and if I curse she slaps my face. She's done it on the street before and it gets me even madder. We go to Mays, where she buys me a flowered dress that I'm afraid I'll never wear, jeans, sneakers and underwear.

"Do you need a bra?" she whispers, leaning toward me as if she were selling something illegal.

I laugh for the first time in days.

Will, home from college in Ohio, phones. He's having a party at his house, and everyone is invited. I call Sara, but she feels too sick to see anyone, and Barb is out with Mr. Wonderful.

At Will's the music is so loud I don't have to think. I keep watching the door for Eric. We pass around bottles of cheap red wine and smoke. Michael plays guitar in a corner and sings songs by Leonard Cohen and Joni Mitchell. Marcia runs across the street to the supermarket and comes back with a bag of Chips Ahoy and a carton of ice cream. Both get passed around, along with a soup spoon that we all share.

I watch the dancers. Everyone from high school is here. I want to keep this moment and carry it around forever.

Will is lanky and handsome, with dark curly hair, like me. We look like we could be sister and brother and our birthdays are exactly three days apart. He finds me sitting on the sofa and hands me his cigarette.

"Looking for Eric?" he asks.

I nod. "How's the Midwest? Are you seeing anyone?"

"No one special." Will shrugs.

"You'll find someone. Who wouldn't want you?"

"Let's make a pact, Liz. If we're still single when we're 35, let's get married." He puts out his hand for me to shake.

I can't imagine any man that I want would ever want me, so I take his hand.

"You come home for ten days and you don't even spend any time here." My mother, clearly tired with our peace treaty, begins hurling missiles.

"I hate it here. I feel like I'm dying." I don't know how to be any more straightforward.

Before she can finish saying, "What do you mean, dying?" I am in my room with the door closed. I know what I want to do more than anything, and I know I shouldn't do it.

Friday night I go out walking. At first I meander. Up one street, down another, left here and right there. I try to tell myself I'm not going anyplace special, just wandering, but I am on automatic pilot and there is no stopping me.

I had consciously avoided being anywhere near his house all week, but soon I find myself looking at Eric's front door. I haven't spoken to him in almost a year. There are lights on

in his house; someone's home. I take a deep breath and ring the doorbell.

I imagine every scenario. He's out. He's dead. He's with a girl.

I hear footsteps inside and plan on the worst, so I won't be disappointed. The worst, of course, is that he's with someone else.

He pulls the door open and a wave of warmth floods my body.

"Hey Liz," he says with that smile that always makes me melt. He invites me in; his parents are at the movies, he says. His blond, wavy hair is longer now, and falls easily past his shoulders. His eyes are the color of a blue gem, and just as spellbinding.

We sit on the floor in his room, between the bed and the stereo. "You in school?" he asks.

I tell him about Mohawk, and pretend I'm happy there. I don't want him to know how much I hate it and how lonely I am there. I want him to think I'm happy and doing just fine without him. "What about you?" I ask.

I am lost in his eyes. They are oceans that if I'm not careful I will drown in.

"I've been pretty busy, planning demonstrations, tripping my brains out. I think I'm gonna leave school after this semester. Go to Haight-Ashbury."

I wait for him to say something about a girlfriend, but either he doesn't have one, or he's being very tactful. I have no boyfriend, although my philosophy professor hit on me. I seriously considered it at first, but I want a real boyfriend, not a series of clandestine trysts on a fake leather couch. I want to hold hands on the quad and have study dates. I want to make out in the stacks, with its smell of musty paper. I want someone to love me.

"What did you end up doing last summer?" I ask. That's when he dumped me, the previous summer.

"I worked some odd jobs. Went to Woodstock. What a trip! Hitched to San Francisco. Fried my brain on acid. My life was sex, drugs, rock and roll. Then I hitched back to school."

I had sex once since Eric dumped me, last summer, with this guy Marty who I think really liked me, but I kept wishing he was Eric. I didn't want to be mean to him, so I never saw him again. In fact, it was the day of the moonwalk, because after I left Marty's house I stopped to pick up a newspaper and it was all over the front page.

Eric and I look at each other for a minute. I wish he would wrap me in his arms like he used to. I want him to kiss me and make love to me. But we sit on his gray carpeted bedroom floor, looking at the sleeve of the Grateful Dead album that's playing, with the palindromic name I can't pronounce: Aoxomoxoa.

"I met the Dead last summer on the Coast and helped set up for a few of their concerts. What a trip."

"Far out," I touch his arm for emphasis. He makes no response, but for that tiny moment in time, I can feel the warmth under his sleeve, and I imagine myself engulfed in him, pressed against his chest, him kissing my hair, making his way down to my lips.

"Are you going to the Be-In this weekend?" I ask. I am running out of anything to talk about that doesn't involve my desperation.

"A bunch of friends from school are planning to meet there. You?"

"I may go, I don't know yet."

I look straight at him, searching his blue eyes, the eyes I once thought I knew. I try to look through them to his soul, but I can't. I wait for him to say, "Let's go together." He doesn't. He is unreadable. There is nothing beyond his eyes. He is two-dimensional, like the ancient world.

The last time we were together was last May at Eric's birthday party. I went up to his school to be with him, and that night, after the party, lying in his bed in the dark after making love, he told me it was over.

"I have to go out and find my place in the world. Finals are next week, and then I'm hitting the road. I don't know where I'll end up."

"But we can be together. I graduate next month. Wait for me and we'll go together."

"I have to be on my own, no responsibilities, no ties."

I don't remember falling asleep that night, and in the morning he walked me to the Greyhound station and kissed me good-bye. It was like in the movies, only worse, because it was happening to me.

After a short silence the record ends. He puts on the Cream album, the song is "Sunshine of Your Love," the song that was playing when we met. I see that day all over again, the cool late summer breeze floating into the room, the sweet aroma of grass, and the looks we exchanged, looks of discovery and desire.

Listening to the song, I am aware of how different my world is now. I'm in college, standing on the cusp of life. Eric has come and gone. Maybe he once loved me, but he never will again.

"It's time for me to go," I say. I stand up. I am in someone else's body. It's not me leaving, because I want to stay here forever. But something outside of me makes these words come out of my mouth, and propels me along.

He walks me to the door. "Let's keep in touch," he says, but the words are hollow, spoken by a man who is lost.

That night I stay up and finish my English paper that's due the day we get back. I had planned to blow it off and take an incomplete, so I am happily surprised. On Easter, I go to the Be-In with Tina, who's in my art history class and lives nearby. I'd forgotten that I gave her my phone number.

The old blue Rambler picks me up to go back to school. This time, there's only me and the ed major in the back seat. The frat boys are driving their own cars back to school. And I'm not wearing my thick winter parka. I roll down my window and smell the early morning air. Spring has come, and I'm traveling much lighter.

© 2010 Alice Graves