



# The Summer of Huffing Glue

By Jamey Gallagher

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The National Guard was helping nurses and doctors wheel patients out to waiting buses. Above them, the sky was a purple mountainscape. The rain had momentarily let up, but floodwater already covered our ankles. Mrs. Grueller cupped a cigarette in her hand, exhaling smoke through her nostrils. The leg braces on her wheelchair were out straight, and beneath her johnny her old lady legs were pale and speckled with purple varicose veins. I didn't want to admit that I was scared, but I was. It had been raining for days, but it had really opened up only after I got to the hospital, where I was volunteering that summer. There were patients with IVs who needed assistance, patients hooked up to machines. There was movement and chaos in the wind and rain. It was all very third world.

Maybe I could have been more help elsewhere, but I had been moving Mrs. Grueller down to Radiology when the evacuation order blared over the loudspeaker. This is not a test. Whoop whoop. I had assumed responsibility for this one old woman, and nothing else. It was not easy to push the wheelchair through the floodwater. There were already things moving inside the water—branches and foam. Snakes, I wondered? I had recently read *The Grapes of Wrath* for college prep English and I imagined all of us holed up in a barn somewhere for weeks. I imagined supping from Rose of Sharon's breasts. I imagined forty days and forty nights. Mrs. Grueller reached over and tugged the cuff of my smock sleeve. Under the smock I wore my Ramone's t-shirt. I also wore ripped jeans and had a fairly substantial Mohawk. It was supposed to be the summer of huffing glue and playing out at seedy bars that didn't care that we weren't eighteen yet. Instead, after I had failed to find a job, my mother had forced me to volunteer at the hospital. I made my surliness felt. I was not well liked.

“Get us on one of those buses, fuckhead,” Mrs. Grueller said into my ear. At least that's what I thought she said. It was hard to believe that an old lady would use that kind of language, but Mrs. Grueller was infamous among the transportation department people. Talk about surly. No one liked her, either. We were a matched set. The rain bit into my face. I felt bad for all the old sick people forced out of their comfortable hospital beds. As if it wasn't enough that they were dying, *this* had to happen to them, too. Because I volunteered with the transportation department, I had been on every wing and ward and floor of the hospital—the Oncology wing, Cardio, the Intensive Care Unit, the ER, the morgue. I had come to know the hospital in an intimate but superficial way, wheeling around gurneys and wheelchairs and the people inside of them. CAT scans and the cafeteria and PT and Outpatient Care and Telemetry and the children's wing with its rainbows and fairies painted on the walls in bright colors. The buses were military colored. A few Guardsmen stood by the door helping people on. There were ramps for wheelchairs. In the time it took me to get from the entrance of the hospital to the bus, the floodwater raised at least four inches. It came to the top of the wheelchair's leg braces. I slogged forward, up to my calves. I thought about strange creatures dragging me down to the bottom. I imagined dead cows floating past like biological islands. I thought of all the medical waste that was supposed to burn in the incinerator drifting away. Bloody needles and gloves, amputated limbs and diseased kidneys.

On the bus I felt safe, protected, insulated from the event. Like we were going on a camping trip. I felt a little flare-up of boyish excitement. Boy, something was

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really happening here. I liked to complain about how boring my life was, and this was not boring. The wind pushed the bus like a huge animal nosing us. Out of the wheelchair now, Mrs. Grueller stared straight ahead of her, then lit up another cigarette. I lit up, too. Why not? A few people looked at us, but back then you could smoke without being a pariah. We kicked back and watched everything. The people out the windows looked small. When I spotted the smocks of fellow volunteers, still hard at work, ferrying equipment to the buses, I felt slightly guilty. The bus filled up, but no one sat in the aisle across from us. A smell lingered in the air. It was impossible to tell whether the smell came from so many sick and dying people crammed together on a bus, from the bus itself, from the floodwaters carrying weird stuff, from the few days of rain, or what. Mrs. Grueller chain-smoked, lighting one cigarette off the cherry of the last, stomping the butt with her slippered foot. I wanted to tell her to conserve—who knows how long before she could get another pack—but figured she was old enough to do whatever she wanted. The wind really whipped, and even though the bus was full it felt like it was in danger of being pushed over. The water covered half of the big tires.

“We should get the hell out of here,” I muttered.

“Calm down,” Mrs. Grueller replied. In her voice I could hear spite and anger, but for some reason that was good. It made me believe that she liked me.

Just before the buses took off two people got on, walked down the aisle and settled themselves beside us, and I just about shit myself. One of the people was an old man with skin so pale it seemed to glow, a bald pate, the hem of his johnny green with floodwater. The other person was a girl I knew named Sarah, a candystriper with black hair, a thin nose, perfect legs, and a smile that made me want to throw my heart up and eat it again. She went to the same high school as I did, but we rarely crossed paths. I’d seen her at the volunteer orientation at the hospital and had run through an elaborate series of fantasies, all of which ended with me impregnating her. They were sexual fantasies, oh yes, but they were also domestic fantasies. I didn’t want to just have sex with her. I had too much respect for her. I was afraid of dying in the flood, a little bit, but I was far more afraid of having to figure out what to say to Sarah. Anything I said would sound stupid and earn me her everlasting scorn. She was one of those girls who were popular but didn’t seem to look down on anyone else. I looked away, over the shriveled nose of Mrs. Grueller, at the floodwaters stretching away, nearly covering the stone wall that encircled the hospital. I was aware at all times of Sarah, in her candystriper uniform, her bobby socks, her small white shoes, and the feet within those shoes, and the legs that were a starting point for the feet. And so on.

“You think you’re something else with that hairdo, don’t you?” Mrs. Grueller said suddenly, glancing at my Mohawk. I closed my eyes and prayed that she would not start now. I didn’t know how to respond, so I didn’t. “You kids think you’re so radical with your hairdos and your chains and your ripped pants. You don’t know what radical is.”

I wanted to strangle her. I pictured my hands closing around her old lady neck, but then I imagined that the flesh was loose and cold on her neck and I couldn’t finish the job out of disgust. We were slowly rolling out of the hospital lot. I wondered how many people would lose their cars. Some cars were floating out there already, bumping together like bumper boats. My mother had dropped me off; I was fifteen years old.

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“Have you ever heard of the Bread and Roses strike of 1911?”

“No,” I said. 1911 seemed like another world, no more or less real than Star Trek worlds of blue aliens and tribbles.

“I have,” Sarah said. I was thankful for the interjection because it gave me a chance to look at her. Her face set daggers off inside me, like a bag of nails exploding. Blood rose to my cheeks. I wanted to die. I noticed a tiny mole beside her nose, and a black hair sticking out of the mole. The imperfection made her real, which increased my desire for her.

“The Bread and Roses strike is why fuckheads like you don’t have to work but can volunteer at the goddamn hospital. You ever hear of the eight hour day? You can thank the strikers for that. They turned water cannons on us. It was the middle of goddamn winter. There were pregnant strikers who marched right into those Pinkerton assholes and *lost* their babies.”

I had no idea what she was talking about.

“Workers rights, child labor laws. We’re losing it all with this asshole Reagan in office. Bah.”

I lit another smoke and looked out the window. All the other patients were quietly conferring with doctors, nurses, and Guardsmen. They seemed to find everything perfectly normal. There was about one doctor or nurse to every four or five patients. The bus driver wore a uniform, and there was a Guardsman standing near the door with a gun, getting jostled with every pitch and yaw. This was real stuff happening. I didn’t want to listen to the old lady. I wanted to experience this. But Sarah seemed to be listening to her.

“If your family comes from Lawrence or Methuen, they probably had some part in it and you don’t even know it,” Grueller went on.

“Sorry,” I said, quietly. My father had grown up in Lawrence, then moved to southern New Hampshire. We lived in a split entry house. Everyone around us lived in identical houses. I hated it.

“My grandparents were in camps during World War II. Japanese Americans,” Sarah said.

“Yeah?” Grueller said.

“You don’t *look* Japanese,” I said, glancing at her face. What a stupid thing to say. She closed her eyes and breathed through her nose, took a deep breath, suppressing her anger. The old man beside her looked at me, too. He glowed. His breathing was so labored that I could hear it above the grinding of the truck’s gears. Now that I thought about it, there was something slightly Asian about Sarah, around the eyes. God she was sexy.

“They worked hard all of their lives, and then one day they got put into a camp. Like criminals. They came out and they worked hard again.”

I felt stupid. What a stupid life I had had. Nothing important had ever happened to me or to my family. My grandparents had worked in the mills most of their lives. My grandfather had fought in World War II. Guam. He told me stories I

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immediately forgot. He didn't like Reagan either. Politics meant nothing to me, it was just a swirl of people talking about things that didn't matter. In the transportation department office they listened to the Iran-Contra trials all day long. It had no meaning to me.

"Volunteering is working, too," I said. No one replied. The buses were having difficulty getting through the floodwater, their engines chugging low. High hills surrounded us, but we couldn't seem to get to them.

"Where are they taking us anyway?" I said. I felt like the survivor of a nuclear attack. If this was what was left of humanity, we were in bad shape. I imagined repopulating the world with Sarah. Her calves were skinny and bare. I wanted to bite them. I had not gone without music for so long in a long time. I'd left my Walkman back at the transportation department office. I tried to figure out a good soundtrack for the postnuclear world. Iggy Pop, "Seek and Destroy," definitely. The Dead Kennedies. Black Flag. Nihilistic shit. I rubbed the calluses on my fingertips. I was still a shitty bass player, but that was all part of the plan. Don't get too good or else you're not punk anymore. I wanted to ask Sarah out somewhere, but where? Where did a girl like her go? Did she really exist in the same world I did? It seemed hopeless.

The buses pulled into the high school parking lot. The water was waist high when we climbed down into it. Limbs drifted past. A soccer net. Rocks and bricks brushed past my legs. The floodwater was still warm, but it was cooling quickly. I stood across from Sarah, imagining her bare, thin legs in the water. We helped the patients onto inflatable rafts and then nudged the rafts to the next group of volunteers. There were so many sick people it was unbelievable. We guided their fragile limbs. When Mrs. Grueller got into the raft, she looked at me.

"See you inside, fuckhead," she said.

We didn't talk much while we worked, but sometimes we brushed against each other, and after a while it seemed natural. On a few occasions we stood hip to hip. When the bus was empty we started toward the next one.

"Hop on my back," I said, and tried not to be shocked when Sarah did. I could feel her chest and lower hip against me. It wasn't exactly sexual, but it wasn't not sexual either. She breathed near my ear. Her breath wasn't minty, which was reassuring. I felt like the luckiest man in the world.

"How do you know Mrs. Grueller?" she asked.

"I don't."

"She likes you."

"She calls me fuckhead. How much could she like me?"

"Everyone I know is afraid of her. Nurses, even doctors. She yells at people. Sometimes she kicks them. Besides, you *are* a fuckhead."

"Ha ha," I said. It was hard to walk through the water, but not because of Sarah. She didn't seem to weigh anything at all. Although the flood was loud, I couldn't tell where the noise was coming from. I felt her hand on my Mohawk, the light touch of her fingertips communicating through the strands, into the nerve

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endings in my scalp.

“I’ve always wanted to touch it,” she said.

“All you had to do was ask.”

For a few hours we helped set up the makeshift hospital. I ate a tray of school food with Mrs. Grueller—pork chopettes with fake mashed potatoes. It was the same school I went to, but it seemed magical now. A refugee camp. The emergency lights glowed weird yellow. People made calls on the payphones, but I didn’t want to call my parents. I felt out there. While I was helping set up cots in the gym I ran into Sarah again.

“Have you ever been on the roof?” she asked.

“No. *You* have?”

“Follow me.”

In a second floor hallway, she slipped into a utility closet, a place I’d never known existed, and then she climbed a series of metal rungs and opened a trapdoor. Outside it was thick dark, the rain spitting, the wind intermittent. She leaned against me when the wind pushed her. We stood on the edge of the flat roof. I put my arms around her and she leaned back against me. Junior year was approaching, and there was no way to predict what would happen to us once school started. All around us were the floodwaters, a black sheen like oil. All the lights were out in town. There was nothing but flat black water. Beneath us, sick people were struggling to stay alive. Later that night an old man, the old man that Sarah had led onto the bus, would die, and a baby would be born in the culinary wing of the high school, where the makeshift maternity ward had been set up. Mrs. Grueller would live on, explaining the labor movement and the Bread and Roses strike to me. I thought of that Tom Petty song—which was too mainstream for me, but which I had grown up listening to—“Even the Losers,” and I waited for the right moment to press my lips against Sarah’s. I could wait forever.

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**Jamey Gallagher** lives in Baltimore. His most recent publications have appeared in Bayou Magazine, Stone Highway Review, Northwind Magazine, and Digital Americana Magazine.

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