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IRDEST SUMMER TIONS

from competitively chucking cow shit to wrestling in the finest potato purée... page 16 by esmeralda rupp-spangle

a dip into some fascinating, unanswered

puzzles throughout history

play in a band (or not)

by blazer sparrow

by wombstretcha the magnificent

nage 21

page 34

UNSOLVED

THE HEAT: FIVE S TO STAY COOL

insider tips to avoid roasting your bits if you

2222

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3



short story-essay crossover including self-bondage, infidelity, and the perils of relationship anxiety page 38

by jaime dunkle

EROTIC CITY	
SPOTLIGHT OF EVENTS	PG. 18
	PG. 19
EXOTIC MAPS (PDX /OD /	PG. 24
	PG. 28
HOW TO KEEP YOUR OCTURE	PG. 32
MISS EXOTIC OREGON 2022	PG. 36
	PG. 42

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BY ESMERALDA RUPP-SPANGLE VERDEST SUMMER CELEBRATIONS IN THE USA

With the peculiar mix of paranoia fatique, frustration, isolation exhaustion, and collective desire to just say "fuck it," this vaccine rollout has given most of us here in the US a chance to really start getting back to normal.... or normal adjacent, at least. By this point, though, normal isn't gonna cut it. Stupidly dangerous or absurdly incautious seems more like what's on order. Given that, let's have a look at some of the weirdest celebrations and festivals that have graced our great nation in the summer months. Many of these may or may not be happening this year, and checking ahead of time before just showing up with a keg of beer and rubber pants seems like a good idea. That said, if enough people have the same idea officially sanctioned or not-it seems like the party would be back on. For some of these, the day may have already passed and won't come around again till next summer, but that will certainly give us all something to look forward to.

Lebowski Fest [July 20 & 21, Louisville, KY]

I remain slightly perplexed at the immense popularity of this cult classic, but if you're into "The Dude," this is the place for you. Socks with sandals are in abundance, as well as white Russians, apathetic personal hygiene, and so many bad impersonations; you'll likely have an aneurysm before you can get drunk enough to regret buying a ticket to the Lebowski Fest.

Avon Heritage Duck Tape Festival [Varying, this year it runs through August, Avon, OH]

This year the official festivities are indeed canceled, but you can still sign up to win a \$1,000 gift card and some free Duck Tape for making the weirdest, most creative, tape-based sculptures you've almost certainly spent more than a grand in materials to craft. Normally, there's a parade, a fashion show, and general adhesive-themed merrymaking, but this year the city has opted for a Duck Tape scavenger hunt (which sounds strangely ominous to me, somehow). I guess this is what you do for fun in Ohio.

The Wayne Chicken Show [July, Wayne, NE]

The 2021 Wayne Chicken Show is ON! As of the publishing of this, it will have passed you all by, but I know where I'll



be next weekend. Yep, watching the "Chickendales" (shirtless men with paper bags mocked up to look like chickens... sort of) do their sexy dance, participating in the rubber chicken toss, attending the chicken dance, and winning the "national cluck-off," which is absolutely a hundred times more humiliating than it sounds. Plan to see me there next year too, guys!

Great Texas Mosquito Festival [Late July, Clute, TX]

Are you looking for new and exciting ways to catch heretofore unknown parasitic infections? Then, Clute, TX is the place for you. With a giant inflatable mosquito mascot representing the local area's most well-known feature, this otherwise largely unremarkable fair will go down as one of the most disappointing pieces of false advertising around. There don't seem to be any "How much blood can you lose and remain conscious" or "Malaria Mosquito Roulette" contests at all. It's just music, food, cornhole contests and for some reason, "washer pitching," which appears just to be throwing hardware for sport... Pass!

Mothman Festival [September, Point Pleasant, WV]

Well, if you don't have anything else going on in September, why not show up in a large, uncomfortable Mothman suit and try to look like you should be taken seriously, as you attend talks by paranormal researchers and alien investigators? There's face painting, a Mothman museum, and... well, that's pretty much it. Apparently, there's some kind of statue you can take selfies with if that sweetens the deal for you. If the moth/lamp meme has any life left in it, it'll be revived here.

Wisconsin State Cow Chip Throw [September 4, Prairie du Sac, WI]

It wouldn't be America if we didn't have at least one festival dedicated to hurling shit at each other. There's a beer garden, kids' games, arts and crafts, music, food, and more, but the main attraction is competitively hurling cow dung. Thanks, Wisconsin, for proving you could be more Wisconsin than I ever thought possible. "festival" (and I use that word loosely) features recipe contests, the world's largest spinach salad, crafts, games, probably a bunch of Popeye themed crap, and a shockingly high number of suicides. Attend at your own risk.

Barnesville Potato Days [August 27, Barnesville, MN]

The midwest really does know how to up the weird factor when it comes to food, with celebrations centering on fried testicles, bologna, and countless more. This one is unique, though, for its inclusion of mashed potato wrestling, potato car races, a mashed potato sculpture contest, a number of eating competitions, and presumably a complete dearth of days off for cardiac surgeons and EMTs.

Bat Fest [August 18, Austin, TX]

This yearly jubilee celebrates the 1.5 million or so Mexican freetail bats as they emerge from the Congress Avenue Bridge. There's food, drink, and hundreds of amazing and exciting new pathogens that festivalgoers will surely be exposed to as the feces rains down onto concessions and into solo cups of shitty booze. What better way to celebrate the end of a pandemic than by starting a whole new one? I sure as hell can't think of one.

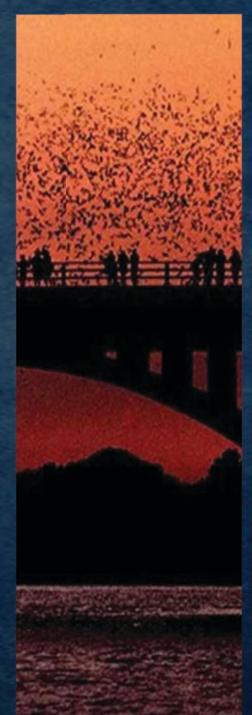


Spinach Festival [September 11 (yes, really), Lenexa, KS]

Coming in at numero uno for the most depressing thing your mom has ever tried to force you to attend, this However you choose to spend the dog days of summer, just make sure to pencil in at least one of these, no doubt, riveting displays of human strangeness. Don't forget to bring a camera, a sense of adventure, and

possibly your organ donor card.

Esmeralda Rupp-Spangle can be found completely avoiding large public gatherings. Not because she's scared of CO-VID, just because she'd rather be smoking weed and watching Star Trek reruns than being around you people. If you really must find her, though, she can be tracked down on Facebook or IG @esmeraldasilentcitadel





BUSINESS AS USUAL

With early closing times and capacity limits in our review mirrors, this summer is shaping up to feel almost normal, right? I mean, let's take a minute to reflect on how far we've come, using our utmost positive, beer's halffull mindset. Not long ago, we were forced to place our last slippery nipple order by 9:35 p.m., in hopes of reaching that desired level of sloppiness that only career alcoholics can achieve prior to 10:30 p.m. If that wasn't irritating enough, our favorite watering holes had a capacity of 12 penises after accounting for dancers, bartenders, and that guru of all things greasy in the kitchen. Top that with having to remember to put our stinky, now-soaked masks on every time we went to piss, and it was a miserable time that was only marginally better than staying at

THERE'S SOME

IN THIS

HOUSE

home — or at least that's what we told ourselves.

So, the next time you want to complain about hearing your fifth set of Cardi B's "WAP," just remember how things used to be and fix your 'tude. In fact, you should punish yourself for not appreciating all your many blessings and sing along — loudly! That being said, I would suggest you stop just short of the end, so you don't get thrown out for insinuating the beautiful entertainers are ladies of the night.

Yes, it truly is business as usual in the industry! There are all kinds of things going on this month, including a Bikini Car & Dog Wash at Lucky Devil Lounge, a '70s Disco Party and Wild Wild West Party at Stars Cabaret (Bridgeport & Salem locations respectively), and Girls Gone Freakiest Contest hosted by DJ Dick Hennessy at Pizza Yaki. Make sure to check *Erotic City's Spotlight* or their respective ads for the dates, times, and details. See you there!

Let's not forget sales and specials, too. It's "Romance Awareness Month" at Adult Shop and Eva's Boutique. Score 20 to 25% off a range of awesome, naughty stuff. Don't stop there though, head straight over to one of the five local Taboo (Video) locations and check out more in-store specials than you can shake a crop at. Not to be outdone, Fantasyland is keeping the party going 24 hours for all your late-night, bowchicka-wow-wow needs!

And specifically for the ladies, we have a very unique service being advertised by Honeypot Harmony: *Cleanse your womb of toxins and past partners.* They are offering *Exotic* readers 10% off their first purchase so be sure to check them out on IG: @honeypotharmony.



Ahhhh yeah!!! Rub your eyes and read that subtitle again, Spanky. *Miss Exotic Oregon* is confirmed and going down this fall! After nearly two years of no *Exotic* events, we'll be crowning a *Miss Exotic Oregon 2022* at the end of the year.

The preliminary qualifying rounds will begin in October, so keep your eyes peeled for more details so you can support your favorite entertainers in their quest for the crown. Check out the full announcement on page 42, and take a walk down memory lane with the past seven *Miss Exotic Oregon* covers!

NAMENTAN

Whether you're an entertainer wanting to register for the pageant, a club owner or manager wanting to host one of the preliminary qualifying rounds, or you want to reserve your VIP table at the finals early, it's as easy as calling or texting (503) 380-5800 or emailing missexotic@xmag.com. First-come, first-serve on all of those accounts, so hit us up immediately.

That's it for this month, folks. Enjoy the rest of your summer and take it easy on the Kratom Lemonade! Oh, and...

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Seroficcity spotlight

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THE MONTHLY COLUMN BY WOMBSTRETCHA THE MAGNIFICENT

TRULY UNSOLVED MYSTERIES

Everyone loves a good, solid mystery, from cruel murders by unidentified hands to "who built this big, ancient stone thing?" People are compelled by the unexplained, lured by the cryptic, and spellbound by the unknown. It is in our very nature to seek answers, and we, as a species, are notorious for it. Our intellectual curiosity is the reason why we are not living in mud huts by a river somewhere and instead have commonplace technologies, which would seem utterly alien and magical to people alive even a hundred years ago. However, for all the modern world's answers and explanations, there will always be some things that remain unknown and possibly even unknowable. I'm gonna pretend I'm Robert Stack and take you all through a shortlist of good unsolved mysteries, avoiding a few notables like the Zodiac Killer, JonBenet Ramsay, the Mickey Mouse penis debacle... really anything that's had an issue of Time Magazine devoted to it.

Toynbee Tiles

Beginning in the late 1980s, odd tile

mosaics have occasionally shown up embedded in the pavement of streets in many major cities across the nation. Each of these tiles makes who is doing this, how the tiles are being placed or why, but naturally, there are many hypotheses, all of which are interesting.



a cryptic reference to the works of historian Arnold Toynbee, the film 2001: A Space Odyssey, and a purported resurrection of the dead on Jupiter, or, if not that, a grand conspiracy between the mainstream media, the US government, and the USSR (despite many of the tiles appearing since the collapse of the USSR), which is tame compared to the dead being resurrected on Jupiter. As you might have guessed, nobody knows

Tamam Shud

In 1948, a corpse was discovered on a beach in Adelaide, Australia. It was the body of a man wearing a very sharp suit, well-polished shoes, and an outwardly snappy appearance. The man possessed neither wallet nor identifying documents. Additionally, even the labels on his clothes had all been carefully removed. His fingerprints were unknown, and the

RGOABABD MTBIMDANL ALAG MLIABO METG 1 TIMISA Tamam Shud code

only clue which law enforcement had to go on was a piece of rolledup paper hidden in a secret pocket in his slacks. The paper was torn out of a copy of the famous Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam and contained only the words "Tamam Shud," which means "it has ended." While eventually, the cops were able to some-the-fuckhow track down the *exact* copy from which the paper had been torn (it had been left in a taxi), in which they found a phone number and a bizarre code. The number was to a woman who lived nearby, who claimed not to know the deceased, and that she had sold a Rubaiyat to a different man, who was not only alive but still had the book when asked. The code remains unsolved, and the body unidentified

Lead Masks Case

The year is 1966, and the place is Rio De Janeiro. A small boy finds two dead bodies, and so the police were called to investigate. The bod-

ies were laying evenly next to one another, and each was also wearing a suit and tie. I guess if you're gonna go out mysteriously, the tip these guys and Tamam Shud have for you is, "dress nicely." In addition to formal clothing, each was also wearing a waterproof coat, as well as an eye mask made of lead. The was no evidence of foul play or trauma on the bodies. A small notebook on one of the bodies was found, which revealed a short agenda, translated here from Portu-

guese: "16:30 arrive at the specified location. 18:30 ingest the capsules. After the effect, protect metals await signal mask." This does not make any more sense in Portuguese. Police reconstructed much of the men's day leading up to their deaths, but no definitive cause was ever determined.

Dyatlov Pass Incident

Deep in the then-Soviet Union's Ural Mountains in 1959, a group of nine experienced hikers was found dead in the deep winter snow. Having camped on the eastern slope of the "Dead Mountain," they were found in various states of undress, some distance from their campsite, with many of the bodies having endured severe physical trauma. Two of them were missing their eyes, one was missing a tongue, and more curious still, one was missing their eyebrows, and several had severe burns. Even odder, their tent was found to have been ripped open from the inside, some of their clothing (which they were scarcely wearing) had been scorched by heat, and levels of radiation were found on others. Six were concluded to have died of hypothermia, and three others by physical trauma after meeting a "compelling natural force."



"FOR ALL THE MODERN WORLD'S ANSWERS AND EXPLANATIONS, THERE WILL ALWAYS BE SOME THINGS WHICH REMAIN UNKNOWN"

The record of the events was then stashed away in a secret archive until 2009. Recent re-investigation has concluded more-or-less the same thing the Soviets did, with many of the mysterious circumstances still unaccounted for. Wilder theories include predation by some kind of Yetilike creature, or a run-in with UFOs, while other more plain hypotheses state the events were merely the result of a freak avalanche.

OJ

Just kidding.

We know the real killer was racism or some shit.

The Dancing Plague of 1518

In July of 1518, in what is now modern-day Strasbourg, France, a young woman began frenetically dancing in the street, only to eventually collapse in a heap, unable to move any further. Soon, the Strasbourgers noticed that others also began dancing in a similar manner, and the numbers of people dancing were rising. The institutions of authority did what they could to try to help, mostly by putting some of the afflicted into asylums and/or special church services. None of this particularly seemed to help, as the dancers eventually rose to an estimated 400 people. Their reasoning back then was demonic possession, or "overheated blood." Modern guesses include ergot mold

poisoning (which causes an LSD-like trip but no compulsion to dance) or simply mass hysteria, which seems like a cop-out to me.

Who Stole My Sandwich From the Office Fridge

Really, who steals a tuna salad sandwich? Who steals *any* food made by a random stranger and left sitting in a fridge? At least, unlike Subway*, however, I actually made mine with real tuna. Suspects around the *Exotic* office include the guy with poor hygiene from IT and possibly the lady who claims to only consume those diet shakes, with not much to show for it. Wilder theories suggest the involvement of Sasquatch, and more tame ones suggest that Dave from receiving (who always reeks of weed) may have been responsible.

So, there we go—a few brain-boggling mysteries, which may never have proper explanations. Now, to try and solve them.

Good luck,

-WStM

Wombstretcha the Magnificent is a Scooby-Doo-esque amateur sleuth, sharp-dressed corpse, writer, and semi-retired rapper from Portland, OR. He can be found at his website, wombstretcha.com, on Twitter as @wombstretcha503, and on MeWe (yay!) and Facebook (boo!), as "Wombstretcha the Magnificent."

*In a series of lab tests, Subway's tuna sandwiches were found not to contain any tuna. It is unknown as of this writing what exactly is in them. If you think I'm pulling your mackerel, a quick search will reveal many articles about it.











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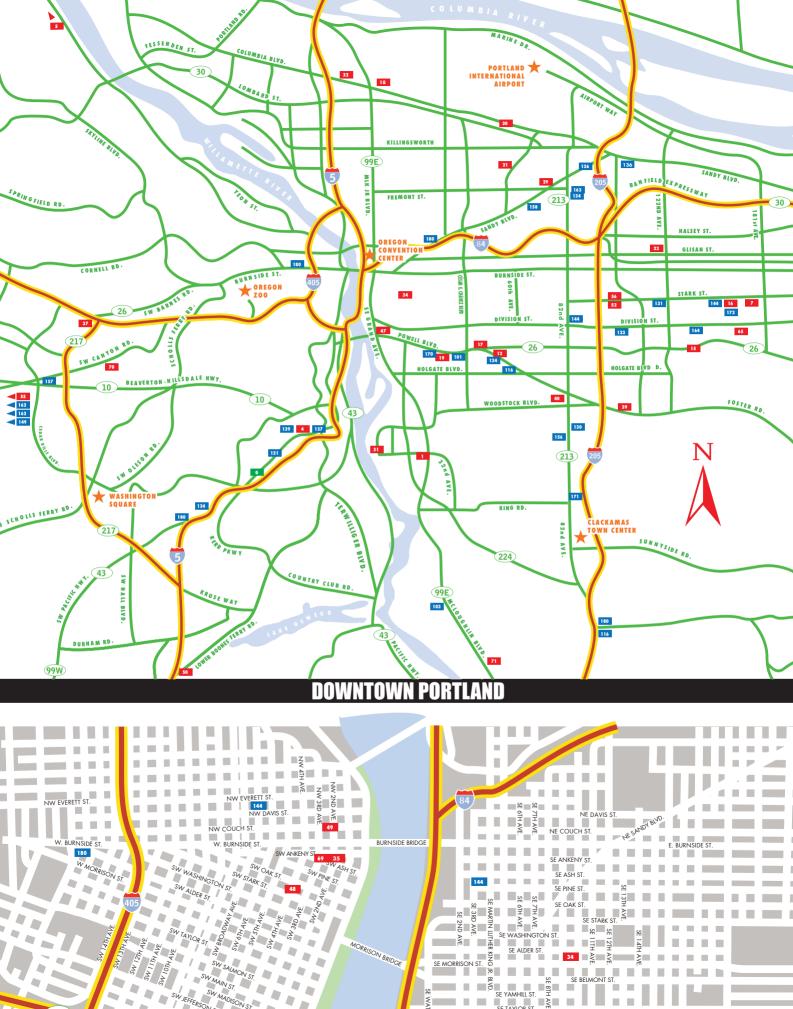


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Oh, sweet, merciful Ra, True God of the Sun! How many animals and/or humans must we sacrifice to you to avoid another one of your awesome and terrible, so-called "Heat Domes" this summer? Your divine wrath is very much noted, and we will do anything to avoid another deadly strike.

In your infinite wisdom, you'll probably say some dumb shit like, listen to our heretical scientists about not burning oceans-worth of fossil fuels daily until our planet melts, but we all know that's never gonna happen, blessed Ra. So, we suppose we will just start planning for hotter, longer, and more powerful "Heat Domes" from your vengeful, holy ass for the foreseeable future.

Humans are nothing, if not adaptable.

So, what does that mean for you and your unpopular local band this summer and every summer? It means band practice is gonna be absolute hell for three months every year. Soon to be four! Five if you losers last long enough. You thought those tiny, cramped, particleboard-insulated practice spaces stuffed to the brim with little ovens pretending to be amps and a bunch of sweaty, unwashed dudes was intolerable before?!

Those box fans you set up in there are just gonna move the hot, BO-flavored air around, you dummy! Also, imagine a packed day at one of the Puddletowns on a 115-degree day! Every room is just a little furnace, in a big furnace, under an apocalyptic heat lamp. You're all gonna die.

But that's where I come in. Your friendly neighborhood scene critic will help you beat the heat with these five freezin' tips.

Don't Play

Put On Wet T-Shirts

Simply go on hiatus for the summer. You have to keep re-wetting the

Or, fuck it. Just break up. No one likes your band anyway. Seriously, it is simply too hot to exist in these increasingly brutal summers. Just take a page out of some New Orleans restaurants' book and shut down for a month. You're not gonna play Coachella. No one wants to see you in some un-airconditioned bar in the dog days of August. Do us all a favor and just don't.

Kick Someone Out of the Band

More than the amps, really, it's the sweating, breathing, body-heat-making humans in your band that's turning your practice spot into a fucking sauna. It's simple math. Eliminate one of the humans! We all know there's someone in your band that you've just been waiting for an excuse to give the boot. Ra, in all his blessed glory, has given you a golden opportunity here.

BEALERAE FIVE WAYS TO STAY COOL THIS SUMMER IF YOU PLAY IN A BAND by Blazer Sparrow

T-shirts, or this stops working after about two songs in 115-degree weather. Then, it actually has the opposite effect. A sauna that's... on you. Also, if you have a lady in the band, this will undo the benefits of the previous bullet point by attracting *more* humans to your rehearsal space, so no smoke breaks.



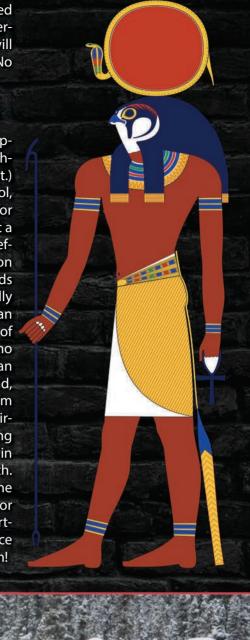
Rehearse in the Walk-In

One of you "pretend" adults works at a bar or a restaurant. Oh, who am I kidding? All of you do. You have access to the walk-in fridge. The thing is, no pithy little portable AC unit is going to be powerful enough to compete with three half-stacks and a handful of heavy breathing bodies. It'll just catch fire. Now an industrial-strength walk-in refrigerator... There's the ticket! Whoever has the keys to the place (one of you has gotta be a closer or opener), just let in your fellow troubadours, take out *all* the perishables from the walk-in, and stack them up on the bar or something, then bring in the amps and the drums. You will thank me a million times over when your bodies and vacuum tubes heat up the walk-in to a nice room temperature. Sure all the meat and vegetables are literally cooking outside, but just pop them back in the walk-in after you lads are done, and neither the boss nor the customers will be the

wiser! Whatever bacteria the pulled pork acquired outside in the sweltering, non-climate-controlled bar will surely be cooked off in the oven. No harm, no foul.

Move to Alaska

I mean, soon, this will be the only option for everyone in the Pacific Northwest (and, eventually, the west coast.) However, I suggest this super cool, heat-beating tip not just as a way for you and your musical cohorts to get a head start on the climate change refugees. Honestly, I think that Oregon and Alaska oughta swap some bands since the migration has historically been southward. Portugal. The Man is the obvious example, but those of you in the punk and especially emo and indie scene know that there is an abundance of Alaskans in Portland, hacking away on loud guitars. I'm guessing it's cause there must be virtually no way for these vibrant, young chaps to have any kind of success in the suburbs of the Great White North. Little did they know that the scene is just as dead here in Portland. Poor lads. Either way, let's send some Portland musicians up that way to balance it out. Hurry! Before it gets too warm!





HOW KEEP YOUR GOTH PERSON HA

To be clear, when the earth is melting, no one is going to care if anyone is happy or not. But to be doubly clear, when I refer to melting, I'm referring to what a goth person considers to be possibly the worst possible time of the year, and that includes comparing it to those winter holiday seasons in stores ("It's the haphappiest season of all," my goth ass). Anything above roughly 82-degrees Fahrenheit guickly starts to turn a goth person's normal daily black on black on black attire into a hot box surrounded by actual misery, woe, whining, possible tears of frustration, and faux suicidal ideations of jumping off the bridge just to get into the cold, cold, very cold water.



So, suffice it to say, keeping these beings happy and in good health during the summer season will not only make them grateful but will make your time with them less dreary and painful. So, let's get to some helpful tips on how to make this season's time with your goth as 'OK' as it can get!

First and foremost, do not ask if they are sure if they want to be wearing all black today. They know the weather, they know what they're choosing to wear, and frankly, do they own anything else but black? No? So, it's up to you to choose places to hang out that are air conditioned, shaded, hydrating, and have snack foods around. Ice cream is great, charcuterie, snow cones, a shady spot at the river (very shady so that if it is above 82 degrees, it's at least 10 degrees cooler), or a movie theater (yes, those are a thing, again) are all pretty decent ideas. Do not go bringing your goth person to a pool party without A/C or to go out to a farmer's market downtown when the heat is that bad. They will hate you for it and look for unreasonable, dangerous ways of cooling themselves off, consequences or possible death be damned.

Do not judge them for their choice of attire inside the house, either. If you are with a goth person and do not own an air conditioning unit, you are asking for a mostly-to-fully naked person on your couch and in your kitchen at any given time of day. Afraid of them answering the door naked? Too bad, it's already happened; your Amazon package was just delivered by a mailman, who will now have a very interesting story to tell the rest of his coworkers.

Keep your fridge stocked with electro-



lyte-enhanced waters and energy drinks. It's hard keeping all that salt in your body when you are literally sweating it all out in your heat-enhancing clothing. Remember this when you see your goth person sweating outdoors. Offer them that water you have on hand for this moment specifically and quickly find a place for them to cool down.

Second time mentioning due to its importance, keep them well hydrated during the day and continue complimenting how cute they look in their 12 pound, 6 inch boots, fishnets, garter, and hat. You know that the hat is the only thing being reasonably worn in this heat, but goth

PPY WHEN THE EARTH IS MELTING



persons answer to no one and will not be told what to do, especially by the heat. They're cute, and they know it. The sun can suck a hotdog.

If you plan on taking a road trip with your goth person, please be polite and keep the car in the shade prior to picking them up. If you don't, the 110-degree heat in the car will again force this person into coming up with an irrational solution on how to solve the heat problem by themselves (e.g., turn up the A/C full blast, and have 10 mph winds of hot, dusty air hitting them in the face for 8 minutes). They will then roll down the window, where the heat outside is possibly worse nowadays, and chance getting heatstroke or worse, starting a "heat-fight" with you (which, to be fair, usually has nothing to do with you but stops the road trip from happening with this person altogether, and causes your heat-stroked-out goth person to stomp back inside, take off all their clothes, sit on the couch in front of the air conditioner, and wish for death).

When you plan on staying indoors with your goth person (which is possibly all they want, if it's truly hotter than cooked hotdog innards), keep your shades drawn, lights low, and turn that air conditioner up to eleven. Maybe join them in the festivities of being mostly naked and make it a fun movie day in. This day may not include sexy time, as that requires your goth person to have their sweaty, hot body be on your sweaty, hot body, sweat more, get really thirsty, and ask if you can finish soon—just too much work. Appreciate just touching their hands and your legs or feet possibly touching each other while you both sit on the couch-mostly naked—watching episodes of It's Always

Sunny in Philidelphia and eating the blue ICEE popsicles (we all know those are the best flavor).

BY HANNAH ONE CUP

Well, these are just a few tips and tricks I've learned along the way when someone has decided to be around me during the summer. I've learned late in life that these things, if performed correctly and without judgment, will make a goth person's *no-good-very-bad-too-hot-I'm sweaty-and dying-please save me-l just want to jump into the river-summer*, into not such a bad experience. Which is about the best you can ask for, so be OK with that.

Hannah One-Cup lives in a secret cave that the hotdog-cooking heat can't find her, wishes she hadn't jumped off that bridge and made people believe she was lost for good. She also wishes that she could leave the cave. But, it's too hot outside. She can be found on Facebook by her name—or in the cave. If you find her, bring water, snacks, and an air-conditioned car.







LOVE IN A PLAIN BROWN ENVELOPE: BY JAIME DUNKLE

Soul was a bad girl. At times, a terrible woman. Deep down, she yearned to be punished for the suffering she caused herself and others. Especially Heart. Or maybe she just wanted to be held. Accountable.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Heart said to Soul on his bed. Even though Soul left Heart for someone else, at least the first time she broke up with him. She left him for someone she barely knew but felt like she always knew: Poetry, who burned brighter than the sun, but was as elusive as a new moon—a brilliance to be experienced, but a flame that flickers beyond grasp.

At that point, Heart wouldn't even call Soul his partner, so Soul justified her flawed behavior. She told herself she did the right thing because she didn't act on impulse. She didn't technically cheat on him, although later, she admitted she was in denial of emotionally cheating on him. Soul couldn't stand the idea of betraying Heart, so she rushed to his home to tell him of her confusing feelings for Poetry, not realizing the ongoing damage about to unfold.

Heart's door was unlocked, so Soul let herself in. She trembled as Heart's dog licked her ankles, eager for affection, which she gladly offered. A freshly showered aroma reached her as she entered the cozy studio. So fresh and so clean. Heart's naked body radiated a striking beauty that had Soul ready to back out of the whole plan. She could instead deliciously disappear into his freckles, his frame, his flesh.

"Are you unhappy with me," Heart asked Soul in a soft voice as she sat on the bathtub ledge, choking back the tears. "Did I do something to upset you?" That was the segue into the first time Soul left Heart.

They had a similar conversation but inverted after they slept together, over a year into their last breakup. This time, it was Soul inquiring if she had done something to upset Heart because he went from vying for her attention to distancing once he had it. Now that she knew what she wanted, he was rightfully cautious. Yet her anxiety flared and disrupted her mind with fearful assumptions.

In a sleep-deprived stream of consciousness, accompanied with self-bondage, Soul attempted atonement. *If I can tie up my anxiety, it won't distort my psyche*, Soul told herself. Then she cried out, "Restrain my hubris! My arrogance! My ignorance!" Soul tied each knot tighter and tighter to wring out her internal chaos and self-destructive disposition—to lasso her negative self-talk. When they last met, Soul twirled out of sync as Heart spun her on the asphalt. She was lost in outer space. Almost never in her body, except in his presence. In his arms. That's how Soul knows Heart is her counterpart.

But, Soul hasn't always known. She used to be fickle. She used to make irrational decisions based on mistrust. She used to expect the worst. It took years for her to figure this out: Soul fucked things up with Heart by ever leaving him in the first place.

beautiful that they take your breath away? Soul gasped for air. Heart caught her in the midst of her overwhelment. "Are you OK," he asked as she inhaled deeply—dizzy and afraid there's just no way he's actually into her.

"You're out of my league, which is precisely 23,000 leagues under the sea," she said because Soul is abysmal when she's dismal, which was at least 75% of the time she was in a relationship with Heart. At least by her retrospective calculations. Although, she could be rounding down.

cated Soul with a tranquility she'd never known. For once in her life, she felt truly loved. She wanted so badly to return this love to Heart in every action, word, and thought. But, the timing wasn't right, and Heart pulled away into sacred autonomy.

Soul hugged Heart as they stood at her car and said, "I really mean it this time; after everything that's happened, you deserve to take all the time and space you need."

In that moment, Heart and Soul agreed,

In a sleep-deprived stream of consciousness, accompanied with self-bondage, Soul attempted atonement. If I can tie up my anxiety, it won't distort my psyche, Soul told herself.

Soul anchored in Heart's crystal blue orbs. Eyes that never lie. Lips that always melt. For once, she knew 100% without a doubt that this is where she belonged-spinning in control instead of out of control. Heart's point got her right in the heart chakra. Right where it counts. In large amounts. A gushing ensued, albeit possibly, maybe, too late.

Heart reassured Soul the door wasn't closed, but she fell out of it anyway, into the void of regret, fear, and loathing. She grabbed onto a ray of light made of Heart's smile, his voice, his face, his lips, his fingertips, his skin, his body, his whispers, his caresses, his sweetness, his pheromones, his laugh. But, Heart's light did not break Soul's fall. She descended to the bottomless pit of her flowered pain, and each dew-soaked petal revealed her true nature in reflections on her way down, down, down.

Have you ever experienced someone so

Soul likes to give herself a little extra rope.

Before the fall, Heart and Soul floated in bouts of bliss and talk of babies over breakfast, yet unbegotten. They bonded over dreams and nightmares. They held each other tighter and tighter like the knots in the rope binding Soul's repetition compulsion to self-sabotage.

Then, when Death snatched Poetry, it made things even worse. Heart and Soul tried desperately to reunite, but conflict continued to tear them apart in outbursts, and resentments piled high. Their relationship ended, and Soul refused to forgive Heart, let alone process their final breakup. She drifted here and there, listless and lonely until the absence became unbearable. She gradually let Heart back in, and as they reconnected, their bond quickly grew stronger than she could have ever imagined. Soul no longer feared Heart's insincerity. She trusted him completely. Heart's mere presence intoxino matter what happens between them, everything will be OK. They finally have found total, unconditional love for each other. In whatever form it takes, their union will always be inevitable.





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