

## Fresh Air

By Hunter Ellis

Humidity and reverb fill the air. All around people are bouncing up and down to the music in front of them. Everyone in the crowd must be under thirty except for the hired security guards standing near the back of the room. Does anyone else in the room wonder whether they enjoy their work? Does it matter? Almost everyone is intoxicated and wearing sunglasses so they couldn't see the bouncers' bored faces if they wanted.

I tap my friend on the shoulder. At first he must think that someone behind him accidentally bumped into him. He doesn't respond. "Hey, Jeff! Jeff!" I shout. Jeff takes forever to turn his head to face me.

"What?" Jeff says. His face contorts to show displeasure. My sudden interruption forces him to stop his trance-like "pogo dancing."

I spread my index and middle fingers, holding them up to my mouth signifying that I want to go outside to smoke.

"Man, this is the best part of the song, Luke," says Jeff, "Can you wait five minutes?" Jeff turns and begins to dance again.

I begin to walk towards the back of the room where the some of the security guards are standing. The room splits off into another smaller room that contains a few arcade machines, couches and a bar. Jeff reluctantly follows behind me after he notices that I have walked away.

I hold my bracelet up for the security guard and he lets me by. Outside of the club the temperature must be at least fifteen degrees cooler. I wipe my bangs on my shoulder while I fish out a cigarette from my track jacket. Jeff does the same.

"Hey, can you spare a cigarette?" says a voice to the left of us.

"Yeah, do you smoke Winstons?" Jeff says.

"They're alright." The young man leans towards my lighter and cups his hand around his cigarette. "Thanks a million." He inhales and lets the smoke blow out of his nostrils. I light up my cigarette and hand the lighter to Jeff.

"Pretty good show, right?" says Jeff, "I love their drummer. He plays with such flair. It really pumps me up."

I inhale another puff from my cigarette, ignoring Jeff's previous question. "So did you see the girl behind us when we first got here? The blonde that was next to me?"

"No, I don't remember her."

"She was really cute – was wearing that tank top. She kind of reminded me of Charlize Theron."

"Oh yeah, the girl who met her friend, and then she moved towards the stage. Yeah, she was something else," says Jeff.

There is a lull in the conversation between us for a moment. I look up at the sky pretending to be lost in thought.

"Hey, Luke. Is that you? How's it going?" says a female voice.

"Cara? Hey! Care for a smoke?" I say.

"I'm okay. So how was your first semester at State?"

"It went well," I say, "The party scene wasn't as good as it is here."

"So, what are you up to this Christmas? Want to go down to the lake for New Years Eve?" Jeff says.

"Hey, Cara," says Cara's male companion, "Let's go! We already missed the first thirty minutes of the set."

"Yeah. Well, it was good seeing you Luke. I'll call you. You too Jeff. See you inside." Cara's voice fades as she turns her head away from us. Cara enters the same door we exited from. I flick the built-up ash off the end of my cigarette. I notice that the group of people to our right talking loudly. Jeff doesn't seem to mind or notice.

"They're talking awful loudly," I say, "How are they so hammered this early in the evening?"

"It's not that bad," says Jeff, "Hey, let's hurry up so we can see Cara again."

"You don't rush a smoke break, Jeff," I say.

"Yeah, and you don't pass up on an opportunity to hang out with a hottie either."

A moment elapses where we don't speak. It is as if I have nothing to say to Jeff and him to me. One of the members of the group motions towards a friend and begins walking towards us. Jeff shoots me a glance that says, "I really want to go back inside."

"Hey, man," the group member says snapping his finger loudly, "My friend over here said you were talking trash about us a second ago."

"Trash?"

"Yeah, he said you thought we were being obnoxious," the young man says. He is wearing a zip-up hoodie over a t-shirt that reads: *Anarchy is no party*. The young man's

hair is cut short except on the top where he has used copious amounts of hair gel to style it upwards. He is wearing sunglasses and holding a bottle wrapped in a brown bag.

"I'm not looking to start anything if that is what you are talking about," I say. I stare near his face but I don't make direct eye contact.

"Yeah, yeah. Spineless prick." The young man walks back towards his crowd. He laughs just as loudly as he has been speaking just moments before. Does he think it pisses me off?

"Hey, Luke, let's go back inside."

"One second, Jeff," I say, "Let me finish my cigarette."

"You have been smoking it for like ten minutes. Are you going to smoke the filter too?"

I take one last drag from my cigarette and throw it to the ground. While stamping it out I notice an earring on the ground.

"Hey, Luke, c'mon."

"One second. I think I found an earring."

"Alright, give it to one of the security guards when we enter," Jeff says.

I bend over and pick up the earring. The earring looks like a small diamond stud and shines brightly when held up to one of the street lights. "I think this might be Cara's."

"It could belong to anybody, but most likely they are inside. Can we go now?" Jeff appears visibly upset at this point. It is obvious that he wants to distance himself from the group standing only twenty feet from us.

"Yeah, sure, let's go back inside." I place the earring in my pocket.

Maybe it belongs to Cara and maybe it belongs to one of the members of the group that talk so loudly in the parking lot we are currently standing in. Or maybe the earring belongs to one of the security guards who lost it on their way into work. Does anyone wonder whether they enjoy their work?