

Shakedown Street

by Jürgen Fauth

Quentin Pfeiffer took a deep breath, opened the car door, and stepped onto Shakedown Street for the first time in five years. The baking-hot blacktop of the Jones Beach parking lot was stretching out all around them, and even though you couldn't see the ocean from here, the flat expanse had a windswept feel to it, only punctuated by a few red stone buildings, the water tower, and the double shell of the amphitheater that hunched a little further inland, on the edge of the bay.

Tonight's incarnation of the traveling bazaar that followed the band around the country, named for the bouncy 70s Grateful Dead song, had sprung up halfway between their car and the stage. Once upon a time, Quentin would've been delighted at the sight, but tonight he was just going through the motions. His heart wasn't quite in it — after all, he'd been working hard on getting his heart *out* of it. Ever since Phish had broken up five years earlier after a disastrous "final" concert in Coventry, Vermont, he'd been trying his damndest to get over his obsession with the band. He'd been done with the entire scene, and he'd made his peace with it. He'd gotten married.

Phish was done and he was done with Phish.

Everybody had moved on.

But then, the announcement came: the band would play three shows in Hampton, Virginia — on a weekend that just happened to coincide with Quentin's wife's due date. And in spite of everything, Q immediately felt the tug and pull of the music. In the old days, he would have double-checked Hampton - LaGuardia flights to see if he could still make it back in time for the birth if Em texted him the moment the contractions started, but he was older and wiser now. He resisted the siren call until summer tour was announced, starting in Boston and followed by three nights at Jones Beach. He put in for tickets as if by muscle memory.

He took another deep breath. The combined smells of ocean breeze, grilled cheese sandwiches, incense and sweat and burning herb that wafted over from Shakedown, along with windblown notes from tinny car speakers all rolled into a potent sensory cocktail he hadn't tasted in far too long. Something opened up in him: only a trickle, so far, but something real that he'd forgotten. Was that — were those really the pre-show jitters? He'd forgotten about that, too, the lurching, growing excitement that came with a show, no matter how much he'd told himself he was over it. In spite of himself, Q felt himself tune into the rising excitement.

He'd made a point of not making plans with any of his Phish buddies, planning on flying solo instead, without having to talk things over or look out for anyone else. He'd been looking forward to sorting through his mixed feelings about the band on his own.

But his wife Em had magnanimously offered not only their floor space but also Q's company and guidance to her niece Sara and her boyfriend Jon, two sophomores from Bowling Green, for their first Phish shows. She assured her brother that Quentin would hang out with the kids and keep them out of trouble.

"It's just a concert," Q had told her. "They're old enough."

"You know what I'm talking about," Em said ominously, and repeated it for measure: "Keep them out of trouble." Quentin had reminded himself that she sounded like somebody's mother because in fact she was. He was a parent too now, and grateful to Em. He had a brand-new baby and three nights off were no small matter.

So here he was, the older guy, the vet, the overprotective uncle, and Sara and Jon were very excited indeed. In fact, if they were any more excited, their fresh faces might just pop off their heads, propelled by the tension of their huge grins — they'd go *plop* and sail off into the ocean. They were bouncing up and down on the asphalt, taking in the scene with a wide-eyed innocence that made Quentin smile in spite of himself. Might as well try on this new, fatherly role, he thought.

"Got everything?" he asked before locking the car.

"Keys, tickets, wallet, phone," Jon said. "Roger, roger."

Q nodded. "Want to check out the scene before we head in?"

It didn't seem possible, but Jon and Sara's grins grew even wider. Sara was petite, as small as Jon, and together they made one of those couples one might mistake for siblings: they were both short, had blonde, wispy hair and wore off-white clothes. They seemed impossibly young to Q, impossibly in love, kids on an adventure, on their way to have their minds blown for the very first time.

And here he was, back where the lot congealed into Shakedown, wide-eyed noobs in tow: two or three lanes of heaving crowds, freaky hats, shiny visors, scraggly beards, flapping tarps, mismatched patchwork clothes, burning incense, stacks of stickers and rows of crystals — the whole hippie circus revving itself up an hour before show time. Q felt the mounting anticipation, whoops and hollers rising here and there, everyone downing their final beer, buying their last edibles, a quick grilled cheese or mushroom chocolates before heading inside. The ticketless were getting desperate, waving their index fingers in the air with extra vigor.

While Jon and Sara marveled at the carnival that had sprung up in the middle of this state park, Q was scanning the perimeter. There wasn't a lot of public inebriation in evidence, probably due to the relatively hefty security presence — Jones Beach was known for a heavy hand with the kind of outside-of-the-law shenanigans this particular crowd liked to engage in. Several pairs of cop cars were parked window-to-window around the denser part of Shakedown, and Q made a note of the yellow shirts and black hats worn by security guys patrolling the outer edge in golf carts. Old habits die hard.

"I want to get a cool lot shirt," Sara announced. "Something you can't get online."

"I want a heady brew," Jon said.

Q snorted. These kids were just too cute.

They filed into the crowd pushing down the lane lined by impromptu stores, camping chairs and folding tables, sometimes just a tarp laid out in front of an open trunk, a few elaborate tents with gas grills and coolers and at least one burrito operation that

involved several sous-chefs, a cashier and a working line with customizable options. Jon got a grilled cheese and a Sam Adams from a guy wearing Groucho Marx glasses while Sara rifled through dresses in a tent with a big sign saying "Beggar's Tomb", after the line from "Uncle John's Band." Q inhaled the smells — a pungent mix of ocean spray, hot asphalt, sage, beer, sweat, and herb. Back on the train, back on the lot.

"Fake tickets! Bunk acid! Dirty needles! Ripped condoms!" one joker yelled.

"So," Jon asked Q after taking a swig of his beer. "What are they going to open with?"

Q shrugged. "Who knows."

"Em said you always knew what they're going to play."

"I hope they play 'Waste,'" Sara said. "Or a Beatles song."

They were standing under a blue tarp where a girl in a "Reba" t-shirt was selling skirts and batik wall hangings. Sara was checking out a large tie-dye one.

"That's not what Em said," said Jon. "She says you're always right and that it's creepy."

Q shook his head. "I just have hunches, like everyone else. It's a matter of paying attention. Sometimes the song is in the air before they decide to play it."

"How much for this one?" Sara asked.

"\$25," Reba said without looking up.

Sharp shouting rang out immediately behind them: "Let go or I'll fucking kill you!" Through a rack of colorful dresses, Q could make out a tall girl with a deep voice and a lanky long-haired guy who was even taller than her, both yanking on a patchwork bag. "Thief!" the girl was shouting now, kicking at the guy's legs and raising hell.

"Motherfucking thief!"

Aw shit, Q thought. Here's trouble.

