

On Acid

Joe Miller

Here's my favorite dinner party story:

A while back I took some really strong acid with my buddies Dave and Chuck, and we walked around the suburbs all day, tripping our freaking brains out. One hit, and we were spouting gibberish. Dave was so far gone he drank out of a mud puddle. Which was a problem because he was supposed to spend the night at my house. We were still tripping hard when it got dark and it was time to go home. So the whole way back I coached him not to speak to my parents, no matter what. Teens usually don't talk to their parents. I had enough sense to remember that.

It would have gone perfectly if my mom hadn't shouted at us, just as we'd reached the sanctum of my basement pad, "Joe! Come here! We got a puppy!" My folks had never hinted at getting a dog. For all I knew, they hated animals. Now, at the worst possible moment, Dave and I were being summoned into the harsh light of the kitchen to pet the damned thing. We joined the whole family, Mom, Dad, little brothers, little sis, and stared at this quivering cocker spaniel while our faces melted.

"Isn't he cute?" my mother said. "We're going to call him Sammy." To which I replied, "Oh. Samuel Clemens."

To make matters worse, they'd also brought a hamster. I looked over and saw Dave holding it in the palm of his splayed-out hand, and he couldn't stop laughing.

That story doesn't really have an end, which is probably appropriate, considering the topic. When I tell it at dinner parties, I usually just say that Dave would go on to die at 25 of a drug overdose, and leave it at that. But it never fails to cracked people up, because I act out Dave's part with wide eyes and a falsetto laugh. And it's also funny, I guess, because it's coming from me.

People have told me that I don't look like someone who's taken a lot of acid, which suits me just fine. Nowadays, all my drugs are for focus and forward momentum—caffeine, antidepressants, an occasional anti-inflammatory, and as many endorphins as I can squeeze out of a daily run. But for a while there, in my late teens, acid completely defined me. I took it all the time. It was cheap and long lasting. Five dollars would buy ten or twelve hours of amazing special effects. Like the second time I took it—three hits of red star blotter right before the Halloween dance. I leaned against what seemed a perfectly sturdy wall and it disappeared. And I could *see* Bruce Springsteen's "Born In The U.S.A." weave through the strobe lights and the ghouls on the dance floor. I know it doesn't sound right, but LSD is perfect for the suburbs. Its hallucinations tend to follow the patterns of nature, the spirals of the Fibonacci sequence, like oil in water or a particularly stunning specimen of wood grain. The suburbs are all straight lines and even spaces. Acid makes your mind go and go. The suburbs are designed to make it stop. It's not a clash, but a complement. Both have what the other lacks.

Nobody knows exactly how acid works, because it became illegal before it was fully studied, but it's said to mimic serotonin, a natural chemical in your body that sends messages between nerves and regulates mood, which is the same thing my Effexor XR does. Naturally, the people who discovered LSD, at a pharmaceutical company in Switzerland, thought it would have psychological benefits. They distributed it to scientists all over the world, and to the CIA, who tested it on unsuspecting poor people in hopes of finding a new way to subdue the Commies. In the 50s and early 60s, thousands of people were experimented on with the drug, most of them voluntarily. We tend to associate the drug with rock stars and writers with rap sheets, but there are quite a few surprises among the list of names: Groucho Marx, Cary Grant, the guy who composed the theme to *Rocky*, even the founder of AA, who was not alone in thinking it might cure alcoholism. Some CIA agents were apparently so taken with it that they laced the punch with it at an office Christmas party.

The drug took on a life of its own, unleashing the inner megalomaniacs of Ivy League professors and New York and California creative types, who felt certain they'd come across an evolutionary trigger that would catapult humanity to the next level, whatever it might be. It wasn't long before the most famous and respectable of the crazed were summoned to the Senate to make fools of themselves, and magazines, newspapers and evening news shows were filled with sensationalized tales of a psychedelic revolution, and of privileged white kids losing their minds. Of course it was made illegal. And of course it never went away. By 1984, it was patiently waiting for me and my dispirited friends to discover it.

We pretended we were into mind expansion, especially Dave, who talked us into trying acid to begin with. He actually studied it. He'd spent most of his junior high years staring at Yes album covers, and he read all the stuff about Timothy Leary and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* author Ken Kesey, who sought to push beyond the novel with a series of multimedia "Acid Tests." In truth, we used it just like any other drug, to cope and to escape. Like that day when my folks brought home the puppy. Leaving out the hallucinations, it went like this: we walked around a field for a while, went to the school and loitered on the steps, stopped by 7-11 but didn't buy anything, and then we ended up in a park, ostensibly to watch the sunset but mostly to smoke cigarettes. Typical Saturday for a gang of ne'er do wells.

On the other hand, back in the field at the beginning of the day, I saw the origins of language—a crucial breakthrough, because even then I hoped to one day become a writer. Unfortunately, I didn't have anything to write it down, so now, when I could really use that knowledge, all I recall is a faint image of a configuration of twigs (in fairness to acid, though, the modern English grammar course I took in grad school produced a remarkably similar experience). And later that night, Dave snapped out of his mud-sipping funk. In my room, he grabbed some golf balls and started juggling and saying the most incredible things. But that's gone now, too. As writer Arthur Koestler told Leary after he tried psychedelics, "I solved the secret of the universe last night, but this morning I forgot what it was."

The last time I took acid was when I was 19 years old, in Joshua Tree National Monument. Just as it was kicking in, and I was climbing up a bunch of rocks to get a

good view, I slipped and very nearly fell into a jagged crevasse. I righted myself, and as I did, my glasses slipped off my face and down into a place where they couldn't be reached. I'm what they call legally blind, so this didn't set me up for a good trip.

That wasn't my only bad one. I took more than a hundred trips, and a few were terrifying. True or not, the main fear going into an acid experience is that you might never come out. My last California adventure was like that; the boundaries between my life and the life of acid were no longer clear. For the next three years, for instance, even after I quit everything but coffee, I would walk around with fuzzy vision, thanks to the \$20 prescription I got from Dr. Huang in San Bernardino. And I ended that excursion flat broke and stranded in Palo Alto a week after my blind acid trip, too high and naïve to realize that I'd made another major breakthrough.

I'd gone to California to see the Grateful Dead. I was just crazy about them. Still am, really. They were the house band for Kesey's Acid Tests, in the mid-60s, which, their lead guitarist Jerry Garcia, the one with the bushy beard and the glasses, said was the band's "first response to formlessness. Formlessness and chaos lead to new forms. And new order. Closer to, probably, what real order is." Their music is like that: just like normal music—jazz, country, all kinds of rock—except it's always falling apart and coming back together again. They'd cornered the market on psychedelic wayfarers, for whom their concerts and tours provided a semblance of structure and goals. Now they were giving shape to my life, too, but my travel mates, not friends like Dave and Chuck, told me there was no longer any room for me in their car. They smiled when they said I could hook up

with some other Dead Heads and just go with the flow, as if they were doing me favor. I opted for Mom, Western Union and a Greyhound back home.

I got nostalgic recently and read Carol Brightman's *Sweet Chaos: The Grateful Dead's American Adventure*, and I was surprised by how profound it was. Brightman was a radical activist in the 60s, and her book asked why the Dead's community had thrived while other more political ones of their era had failed. She surmised that acid was a big reason. "It opened the doors and left them open," she quoted Phil Lesh, the bass player, on the impact of LSD. "You've heard about flashbacks... Onstage was one continual flashback." It seems obvious now, but I didn't realize until I read Brightman's book that the Dead were soaring in popularity back then. They'd scored a top-ten hit the year I graduated from high school, a song where Jerry sang *I will survive!* Thousands of kids like me flooded the scene. Brightman interviewed a few of them, all of whom wound up addicted to smack. One of them, "Marcie," told her how great it was to be at a Dead show when "you're tripping and somebody smiles at you, it's just like: I KNOW!" But then, "in the end, I just wanted to get high—high on heroin, not acid—I didn't care."

I left before I could choose to partake, though I'd heard through the grapevine that some of the people I'd tripped with were now hooked. Frankly, it was appealing to me. There's some good music created on heroin. But a few months after the California trip, I wound up in Narcotics Anonymous instead. I was getting depressed a lot, and, for some reason, I started believing that horses are superior to humans. I had five years of sobriety and a college degree when Chuck called to say that Dave was dead. We'd drifted apart. I

didn't know he'd befriended a pharmacist who worked out in the suburbs. I felt high and mighty after the funeral, watching everyone else drink and get stoned.

Not that my path has been perfectly straight. I smoked pot for a while around my 30th birthday. It reminded me of acid. I'd get really high and watch trippy old movies, like *Zabriskie Point*, where they blew up a wardrobe full of polyester clothes and filmed it in super slow motion. My life started to look like that, only less real, so I quit again. But even today, ten years after my last bong hit, forty years old and married, I find myself craving it. I called Chuck recently. He's sober now too, but we reminisced for hours about our trips. He told me the last time he took it was at a Dead show in Denver. He felt like the arena was hurtling through space, and afterward he walked home with Dave, who was absolutely free of drugs and on a raw food at that time, less than a year before he started to dabble in pharmaceuticals. As Chuck and I talked, I Googled "acid" and found a YouTube video of pulsating black and white lines that you can stare at for 90 seconds and then look away and see the walls breathe. I did it a dozen times one night when my wife was off with friends. And for a while I was making serious plans to take some on a weekend this fall when my wife will be out of town for business. In fact, I found out about the serotonin thing when I went looking on the 'net for evidence that LSD is just fine to take when you're on meds. But then I told my wife what I had in mind and she assured me quite convincingly that it would be an extremely bad trip.

Which is OK, I suppose, because I can still feel it sometimes. This stuff they have me on now gives some of the same body sensations—a tightened jaw, spongy joints and a low hum of energy just beneath my sternum, among others. Just the other day I was

flying down the Turnpike, headed back to the city to cross the next item off my list, a spacey song going on the CD player, when I noticed the sunlight hit the dirt on the windshield. The colors were brilliant. The wheel vanished from between my fingers, and I was just so incredibly happy.