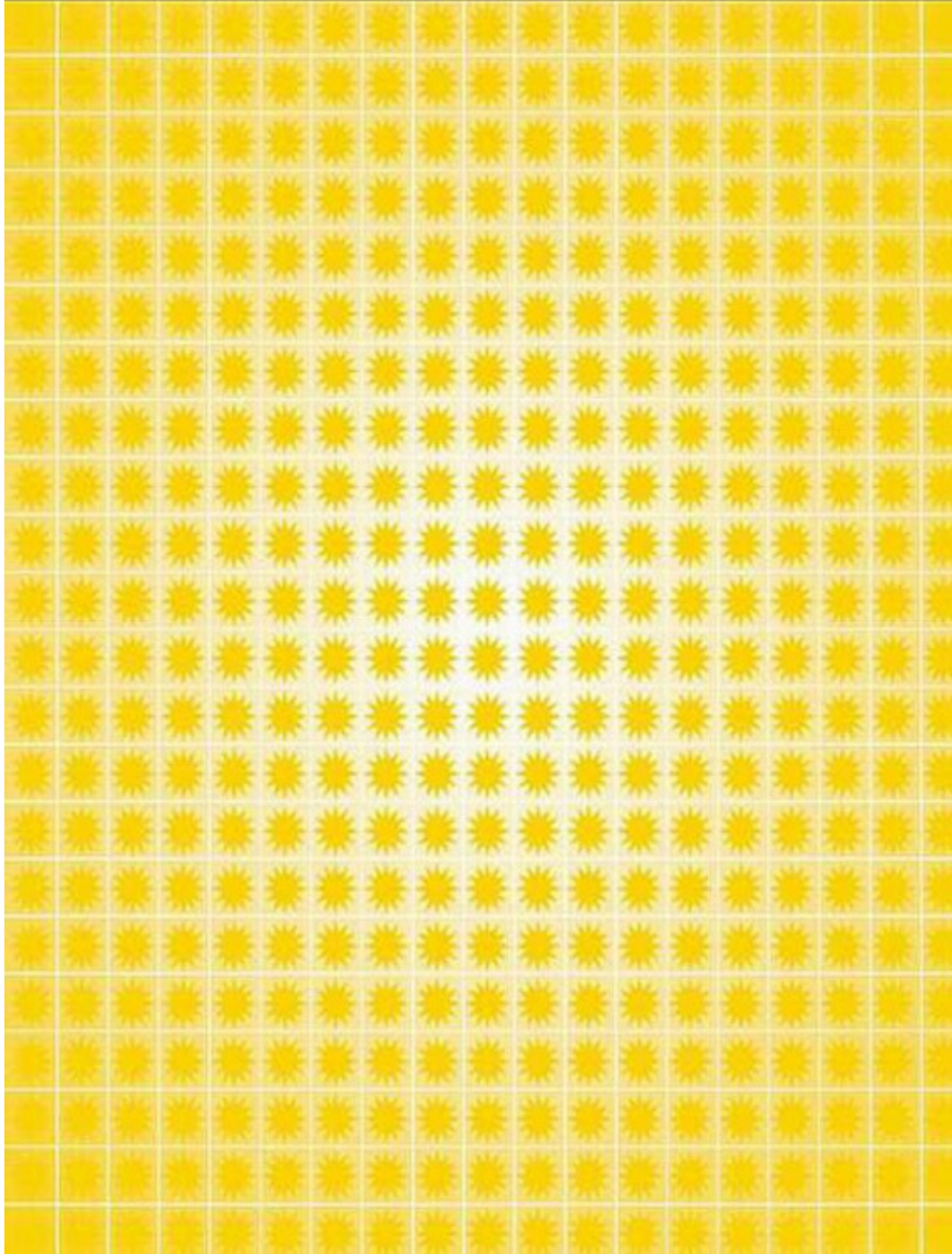

PURE SUNSHINE

BRIAN JAMES



Pure Sunshine

Brian James

PUSH

SCHOLASTIC INC.

NEW YORK TORONTO LONDON AUCKLAND SYDNEY
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*This book is dedicated to
Chris and the other Chris,
Ryan, Jamie, Laura, and Sarah-Maria.*

Keep on keeping on!

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THE SUN FELL FROM THE SKY to go and sleep elsewhere. It was a surrender of sorts, a passing of its reign for the moon to awake. And I lived for that in-between transience when the glass building reflected the brilliance of twilight, when the sky was swept with a short and sudden color of flames before fading dull and gray. I waited. On the park bench, I faced the clouds and waited for that perfect moment when the drugs take over.

The shadows of the trees stretched farther in an exhale of length. The rays of the sun were failing to reach the eastern horizon. Headlights switched on by the dozens as the automobiles inched up Walnut Street in the rush-hour maze. I began to see it happen, like the instant of impact in a neutron explosion. The entire city was bathed in crowning light, and for a brief second even Philadelphia appeared to have been carved from gold. I extended my tongue, hoping by chance to ingest the miracle of weather. I felt the bitter stinging. Eager for the photographic flash that occurs when night has taken the edge and all color fades. I waited, knowing that if I blinked I'd miss it completely.

Eyelids open . . . pushed to the extreme by cold and wind. The nerve centers of my mouth were growing numb. One fleeting image of intensity before the swollen clouds of evening lulled into view. As the brightness receded overhead, I slowly brought my tongue down, letting it settle in my mouth . . . allowing the tab of acid to dissolve further before swallowing.

As I sat up, Kevin and Will, who hadn't paid attention to the changes in the sky, seemed to take their first notice of me in some time. Kevin saw the schoolboy smile broaden across my face. He was confused at first, but then he looked into my eyes and knew.

"Don't tell me you *just* ate yours!" he said, all the while aware that I had. He shook his head in mock reproach. "Why you always hold on to it so long? It'll give you the shits that way."

The smile on my face got wider and wider until I couldn't hold it back any longer. Glancing over at Will, I saw him struggle with the same strain. When our glances met, we lost it. All three of us just starting laughing. It was like that when the three of us got together. We could be just as unworried as children playing on the monkey bars. And it weren't because of the drugs that we were laughing, not yet. In a few hours maybe, once the strychnine found its merry way into the brain and distorted reality. But right then, we laughed just 'cause we were friends.

But still, giving credit where credit be due, the acid was a bit of a happy pill, our moods changed by the simple fact that we knew in three hours' time we'd be mind-racing like a clown at circus speed. Earlier in the day when school let out, Kevin had been in one of his grumpy phases. As a matter of fact, so had me and Will but we don't wear it like he does. It was only Thursday and we all had that *why isn't it Friday?* feeling.

We had drifted up and down South Street for a stay, looking for girls to meet but only spying the usual-type preteen lassies. The kind with lipsticked faces who try acting older than they are. We were seventeen. Men. We needed real women, and the sight of all those immature schoolgirls frustrated us. I think that's what had set us in our mood, in addition to it being only Thursday and not Friday. That's probably how it would have stayed, too, if we hadn't run into Adam.

Adam was one of those club-gangster types with the turned-back felt Kangol hat and jeans hanging off his ass. But he was also a no-hassle dealer. Didn't give you the runaround. Let you pay with no chitchat. By luck he'd just scored a sheet of California acid. "Pure Sunshine" he'd called it because it had little yellow suns illustrated on each tab. It didn't take much convincing to get our money. For five bucks each we'd be fucked up all night, and our Thursday would be like Friday anyway.

“There’s no turning back now, boys,” I said once the laughter faded. It was the truth, too. I always had the same sensation after eating acid. It was like driving a fast car directly at a brick wall, and once you passed the marker, you could no longer stop in time. Once you swallowed that tiny piece of paper dipped toxin, you were in for the long haul. Sitting on that bench I knew that I wouldn’t be normal-thinking for another eight to ten hours. I always got a small nervous feeling, like the one you get on the first day of kindergarten. It was a gnawing knot of panic that left me thinking, *There’s no turning back now, boys!*

Will would always nod his head when I’d say things of that sort . . . like he was an old wise man with a long white beard who couldn’t disagree with some profound truth ventured by a child. I liked it when he did that. It let me know that in some unexplainable way we were connected. That imperceptible nod and the seriousness of his face, admiring that I could state his exact sentiments in such a simplistic phrase.

Kevin leaped up from his perch beside me. Staring us clear in the eyes, he also told it exactly as it was. His voice all full of excitement. “Damn straight we ain’t turning back. It’s gonna be fire-magic the head alright.”

I never could tell if Kevin got the nervous sickness like Will and I got. If he did, he never showed it. In a way this was a good thing. He’d act as the conductor of our fantasy-fueled orchestra, setting the tempo for us to follow. His enthusiasm was quick in ridding my own doubts. Without him, Will and I probably would have spent the entire night on that bench trapped in some paranoid movie of our own creation, unable to participate in the surreality surrounding us. But something about Kevin’s attitude always frightened me. It scared me the way he loved drugs without any inhibitions.

“You’re right, you’re right. Both of you are always right,” Will chimed in. Then he stood. He had a way of moving that the eye could miss, mechanical yet with the swiftness of a snake. When he moved like that, it always threw Kevin and me off guard. In the corner of my eye, I caught Kevin’s expression directed at me. He’d seen it, too.

“Where’re you two going?” I asked, still seated.

“Umm, nowhere. I don’t know.” Will suddenly realized that he’d stood for no reason.

“Oh, nowhere,” I said softly, as if in contemplation. “Then why don’t you guys take a seat? You’re jumping around like fucking grasshoppers. It’s making me nervous.”

I smiled again, getting the laugh out of them I’d wanted. But they didn’t sit down right away. I could tell that Will and Kevin were fidgety. They’d probably swallowed their hits a good half hour before I had. I wanted to explain to them it’s better to wait for the last second of sunshine. *That* was the true meaning of “Pure Sunshine.” But they would have thought I was kidding. I had a habit of creating little rituals that had significance to me alone. Sometimes I’d share them, and Kevin and Will would be understanding and even participate, but I knew they never really *believed* like I did. So I kept this one to myself. Maybe I would tell them later, once we were all peaking and they could appreciate the beauty of idiosyncrasy.

Since I had waited and they hadn’t, they were a short step in front of me. I could tell by the slow expanse of the pupils in their eyes . . . the way they’d been wringing their hands once I’d finally taken my gaze away from the clouds. Now standing up, they shifted from foot to foot. They’d gotten the itch for new scenery, the one sure sign of the dawning of an acid trip.

As confirmation, they both sat for a second, only to stand right back up again. Knowing I wouldn’t win this battle, I also stood. We started to walk, walking right out of the park. The street lamps were on and our slow pace was in step with the soft illumination. I felt my stomach knotting up and realized I was also growing just the least bit anxious.

Center City was abuzz with the bustle of adults heading home. But they were in cars and we were on foot. When the sun sank, Philly was our town. It's not a city like New York or L.A. in the movies, where at night it's alive just like noon. No, Philly's different. Once all those cars traveled the highway to home, they didn't come out again. And when the shops closed at nine, it became a skyscrapered ghost town. Only muggers and misfits, and we enjoyed being a little of both.

We headed downtown, across Broad Street and past City Hall. I felt like waving to the statue of Billy Penn way atop. He looked lonely up there, forever pointing toward nothing in particular. But I didn't wave. It didn't seem worth the effort once the light changed and my feet got going again. I took a cigarette from my pocket instead. I'd been lucky enough not to get carded the day before. I was happy to see I still had an almost full pack. Lord knows I'd need it soon. There was some ingredient in acid that just made a person crave cigarettes. Unchecked, I could go through two packs. And I'm not even a real smoker.

Kevin must have smelled the stale smoke, else he heard the crank of the lighter, 'cause his head whipped around at first puff.

"Shit, you got cigarettes? Why didn't you say anything—gimme one?"

I raised my eyebrows, teasing him. "No way! You and I both know I'll need every last one."

"I'll get some later, come on."

"Yeah, right! Who'll buy them for you? Or are you going to steal some of your mom's Virginia Slims? You can forget it."

"Come on!" Now he was pleading.

"Nope."

While we bantered back and forth, Will moved in that motor-snake way of his again, pulling a fresh cigarette from his own pocket and lighting it with a match. I saw him do it and couldn't help but crack a smile. Kevin turned in his direction only to have his annoyance increase tenfold.

"You bastard, you got some, too? Come on, give me one." But Will and I enjoyed this little sport too much. Neither of us responded. Kevin quickly saw where we were going with this. "That's cool! You're both assholes!"

I took my cigarettes out and handed him one. He took it without thanks and asked if I had a lighter. Will and I started to laugh again, knowing we could play the game all over. But I didn't want to get Kevin in a mood, especially when we would be tripping in a very short while. So I gave him my lighter.

We walked for a couple of blocks, enjoying the autumn air, which somehow always made a cigarette taste better. As a group, we decided it was best to eat soon. Once the effects of the high kicked in, we'd be too much of a mess to enter any restaurant. Not to mention that acid is about the best diet pill in the world. It wouldn't be long before the sight of food in any form would make us all nauseous. So we headed toward the river, down by Chestnut Street where the restaurants were dark.

We chose an uncrowded location. It was probably fancier than it should have been. With our faded jeans and secondhand thrift store shirts, we didn't exactly fit in. Actually, we stood out like London street punks in a Baptist church down South. Our drugged appearance got the disapproving looks from the few other customers and the hostess alike. We sort of appreciated that, though. It reassured us that we were not like them. We were not nine-to-five Republicans. It was uplifting to create a stir whenever we entered one of those places. An in-your-face gesture, like we had said, "Look, we're gonna change your world and we don't care if you like it or not," just by walking in. Will even had the courage to light another cigarette as the middle-aged hostess showed us to our table way in the back. God, I fucking loved when he did stuff like that.

We sat down and pulled in our chairs, and I felt a sudden sense of adventure. The night was slipping into insanity, and I was aware of it. There was no turning back now, and I loved it.

SIMPLY PUT, IT WAS A BAD IDEA. We'd have been much better off getting hot dogs at the great trucks up on Market. I completely forgot to calculate the time spent waiting for service . . . the twenty minutes before the unfriendly waiter takes your order, the other forty it takes to actually get your food and the near half hour you wait once you've eaten before you can get the lousy check. It was always the same in restaurants like that. The service sucked because they knew there was no tip coming from a group of degenerates who looked like we did.

It was just bad planning on our part. We'd figured dinner would be an hour. That would be an hour, an hour and a half since we'd taken our hits. Whenever we took acid, it was like keeping a synchronized clock in our heads. We had to stick to the agenda, time zero equaling the moment we took the tabs. Two hours is the latent period. Two hours is what we had from time zero until the spaceship left from landing.

We had figured on only an hour. Perfect timing. It went to show our judgment was already clouded upon entering. No way an hour in a joint like that looking like we did. By the time the food was slammed down, I could hardly stand the sight of it.

I ate the fries and left three-quarters of my burger to rot. Will and Kevin were worse. They couldn't even touch the fries.

Since there was so much food still on our plates, the dumb-ass waiter never bothered to come back. I swear they run restaurants like a nagging mother would; you can't leave the table until you clear your plate. Fuck that, we wanted to get outta there quick.

The dim light caused a slight spinning effect on the porcelain dishes. My glass of water started to make me dizzy. A tiny piece of food floated on top and I imagined it expanding . . . growing tentacles and giving birth to many others of its kind, taking over my drinking water. I shook the image off quicker than I would've had I not been in public. I didn't want the visuals yet. Not until I was out in the open air and could breathe again. I was already getting the lockjaw side effect.

Kevin was on the verge. He'd already spit water through his nose in a fit of uncontrollable laughter. That had set off a chain reaction of silly behavior. Will dropped his napkin from his lap, bent to pick it up, taking his silverware and nearly his whole dinner with him. It was coming like a tidal wave. Had to be careful not to roll out of there on the floor.

"Alright, serious now. We gotta get a grip," I said, containing my own spasms. For a brief second, we achieved an acceptable silence. But that went as quick as it had come. No choice now. Since I was the one with the most sense left, I flagged down the waiter. Told him we needed to go and asked in a false politeness if we could kindly get our check. When he came back, Will held his money out and dropped it on the floor in front of the waiter. Kevin went head down, it was just too much. Making an about-face, our annoyed waiter took his leave from our night. We left exact change on the table and made our escape.

We emerged from that candlelit extravagance like nuclear holocaust survivors from their backyard bomb shelters. The pupils of our eyes were in full eclipse. I could hear the screams in my head again. All my make-believe friends had returned.

The travels of pedestrians and the steady honking of traffic had thrown us into momentary confusion. We stood on the corner like drifters in a time slip. Though we'd lived in the city all our lives, we were temporarily impaired. Nothing looked right. But everything looked vaguely familiar at the same time.

“Ohhhhhhh, shiiit,” Will said, staring up at a street sign as if it were written in alien calligraphy. “I’m a wreck,” he added with the smile that was slowly becoming a permanent fixture on his face.

“You got that right!” Kevin said this while attempting to pickpocket Will’s cigarettes. Will slapped his hand away, only to give him one anyway.

I fixed my gaze on the approaching headlights. I was mesmerized by the geometry of reflection as the light bounced from one chrome-painted finish to the next. I felt like a four-year-old at a fireworks display. This was definitely some good acid. Usually these little exhibitions of the commonplace didn’t affect me unless I was at my chemical peak. I had expected a slight blurring effect, but this was the real deal.

“It’s yellow,” I said, already able to tell.

“What is?”

I turned toward Kevin, trying hard to concentrate on his face as it moved in slow distortions. “Everything’s yellow! See, over there.” I pointed to the tall buildings uptown, windows lit by overtime employees. “The acid. It’s lemon-flavored.”

Will nodded in that way of his again. Every batch of acid has particular qualities. Some are more auditory than visual. Others are better suited for snow than sunshine. You might call those a kind of winter brew, like they do with beer. Some create a more greenish hue on the objects around; others are yellow like the hits we’d just taken. Will and I considered ourselves connoisseurs, like wine tasters at a convention. We always made a point of identifying what kind we had as soon as we noticed.

He examined the buildings, the people passing by, and even his own hands before approving my assessment. Of course, it’s impossible to disagree with the first hypothesis presented. Once a specific color is suggested, that’s all the eye begins to look for.

I could see from his agitated movements that Kevin was growing restless. The drug has a way of doing that. You have to keep moving . . . keep changing the setting. It’s like a pain you have to walk off. Keep still and it gets too intense, lifts itself up along the spine until your head falls into a tailspin.

“Come on, where we going? I can’t stand here any longer!”

“I don’t know?” I answered, highlighting the second lapse of judgment in our still-young night. We never really had a plan. It’s best to have a plan. Gotta have a place to be when the jets kick in. We were approaching full gear with nowhere to go. I was also feeling that need. The need for a safe house for home base. I’d be damned if I was gonna spend my entire trip on the streets. That’s the sure way to lose your mind.

Will shrugged his shoulders. “We could go to Sally’s. She lives right around here.”

Sally was this girl two years behind us in school. None of us really cared too much for her. She was no scholar, which is a nice way of saying she was as stupid as a cat’s ass. Still she was kinda cute in a girlish way . . . too clumsy to be sexy but a real pretty face and a tight body.

She worshiped the three of us. Thought everything we said was so damn cool. We could make her bust a gut laughing one minute and have her mind grow into vacant confusion the next. She never knew what we were going to do. In many ways, I think she was scared out of her mind by us . . . or at least intimidated as hell. That’s why we hung with her. She thought we were regular geniuses, and so did we.

We didn’t need to impress her. Least, I didn’t because I couldn’t give a fuck what she’d get going on in her head about me. Sure, she was a girl, so sex was spinning around in my brain. But she was a wasted effort in a way. Too young to be serious and not really who I dreamed about. I had my heart s

somewhere else. But I didn't fuss over it, I wasn't in any state to try to impress so it didn't really matter which girl we went to see. Matter of fact, it's probably better that we were heading for Sally's and not someone's I actually gave a shit about.

Sally lived about ten blocks from that wasteland of a restaurant. Down in the river section of Society Hill, where tourists still came to see where old Ben Franklin had lived. Old-money district.

My, Kevin's, and Will's spirits were on the rise now that we had gathered our wits and come up with what was almost a plan.

We had been trying to trip up one another for two blocks, trying to see who'd be the first to fall flat on his face. Cutting into the other's path with a sidestep swagger, hoping the other person wouldn't catch himself in time. This ain't an easy task when your blood is burning up hallucinogens the rate a beat-up, old 70s Plymouth guzzles gasoline. It never worked, though. The only time anyone fell was when he'd lost his own balance trying to get into position. It was still fun. We had a laugh with it. But we also burned down from it. Couldn't even make it the ten blocks without needing to sit in order to catch our wind.

I smoked another cigarette. It was already starting. I felt the chain-smoker mentality coming with a vengeance. But fuck it. I knew I wouldn't be able to smoke in Sally's prissy house. She was a clean cut girl, the kind that would occasionally still wear a dress. I had a deep and sudden wish that when we did get there, she'd open the door wearing one. Probably, she wouldn't even know we were fucked up ..

Just for sport, Kevin had taken to asking passersby for spare change. Every time he did, Will would start giggling. Soon they were creating such a spectacle that I, too, took to giggling. I couldn't help it. The people's faces all resembled misfired animation projects . . . rejected toons from a twisted children's show.

Kevin went right on asking. Speaking louder than he needed to, almost shouting at everyone who by some stroke of bad luck ended up walking past us. They all turned their noses up sourly . . . scrunching their faces in the most ridiculous expressions. Will and I exploded right in their snobby faces, exaggerating the volume of our laughter for their irritation.

"GOT SOME CHANGE? GOT SOME CHANGE?" Kevin's voice was swimming in my head. He had fallen into the broken record syndrome. It happened now and then. Once you started repeating something like that, again and again, the acid sort of got stuck on it. Kevin had no more control over than an ant does on the tides. His voice kept booming up and down the street. "GOT SOME CHANGE? GOT SOME CHANGE?"

He really needed some, too! Like an infant with a craving, he'd whine and moan until someone gave in.

The next person to come down the block was a young mother pushing a stroller. I knew right off this was bad news. Kevin was ready to snap. She had definitely heard him from way down, which'd given her plenty of paces to get agitated. I felt my muscles as they got tense. It was gonna be the show of shows very soon.

As soon as they got into clear sight, I lost it. The baby's head looked HUGE. It seemed to take up my entire vision. For a brief moment I thought maybe it wasn't even real. It was like a helium cartoon with live-action goo-goo noises. They got within a few yards before I pointed at the little tyke, calling out in a stereotyped Italian accent, "ITSZA BABEEE!" This had been a standard with us, no matter what the drug. When babies went by in strollers, we treated it like a cosmic event. Something to do with the way their tiny faces twitched under the observation of a narcotic stare. None of us really knew why it was funny, but it had been once, and through routine it had developed into one of our classic

inside jokes. It always knocked the parents out of the box. (This poor woman was no exception.) They never expected it, and their surprise is what I think we loved most about the whole thing.

The young mother was just near done looking me over when Kevin sprung at her, startling her out of her wits. I thought I saw her arms flail like a stung bird, but it could've been my unsound imagination. "GOT SOME CHANGE?" he roared at her, and I pictured the wind of his words knocking her back on her ass.

One good look into our eyes and the woman knew we weren't all there. She felt confident enough in her class status to brush us off, drugged or undrugged. I half heard her saying, "Why don't you get a job," or something of that type. I lost interest in her. Will and I were busy making all kinds of silly faces to amuse the baby, who was taking immense pleasure in our antics.

"Why I need a job if you just GIVE ME SOME CHANGE!" Kevin was in rare form. She wheeled around him and continued down the street. I saw the break in Kevin's face. The record needle had advanced and he could move on. As the woman walked off, we saw the little baby leaning over, looking back. And with a smile, the little tyke actually waved to us. We waved back and chalked it up as a victory. We'd taught that little kid how to live a little.

We took off running, a bit afraid that maybe that woman would tell the first police officer she saw that a couple of doped-up kids were harassing good people. We were in no condition to deal with that shit. Had to keep on moving. Had to get to Sally's and set up camp before it was too late.

We stood in front of Sally's door. It was nine-thirty, ten o'clock. A good two hours since we'd decided to go there. It took a lot longer than we'd anticipated to regain composure after our little run in with the amusement train. Those five blocks were expanded in our unbalanced state of mind. We'd run off in the completely wrong direction, then got sidetracked by a colorful window display advertising the far-off Christmas season. But we'd made it. A little late, granted, but we had certainly made it.

Sally's house was dark, and we were daring one another to knock on the heavy wooden door. None of us wanted to be the one to greet the angry face of her mom or pops. Will suggested we just climb through the window and break in. He was only half joking. I volunteered Kevin for the job. Will seconded the motion, but Kevin definitely wasn't flattered by the gesture.

"You fucking do it, it was your idea to come here in the first place," he said to Will. Will and I started laughing again because we could tell Kevin was getting the frustration inside him. It was cold outside, and he really just wanted somewhere besides the cement sidewalk to sit on.

"Or Brendon, you do it. Her mom likes you."

It was true, her mom did sort of like me, 'cause I was the only one of us heathens that had any manners. But I was in no condition to deal with Sally's rich, dignified mother at this juncture.

"Nope," was all I said. Then I thought about it and added, "Well, alright. If you give me a cigarette, I'll do it."

"Fuck you, you know I don't have any. Come on, just do it. It's freezing out here!"

Will and I shouldn't have tormented Kevin like this, but it really was fun to watch him pout. We could afford to bluff in this way because we knew, no matter what, there was no way in hell Kevin was gonna knock on that door. And he knew it, too. He treated any activity involving adults and their formalities like a terminal disease to be avoided at all costs. That's why he would've pleaded with us for hours to get one of us to put fist to wood and gain our unsightly selves access to that relative palace. That is, if Sally hadn't heard us and looked down from her third-floor bedroom window.

“Hey, what are you guys doing down there? Why didn’t you knock like normal people instead making all that noise?” We couldn’t help but laugh when she said that, thus creating more noise that she didn’t want. “Shhhh! I’m coming down. And Brendon, put that cigarette out, my parents will kill me if they smell smoke on you guys.”

We saw her little head bob back into the house. I had just lit that cigarette and would be damned if I was gonna put it out before I was at least halfway down to the filter. We could hear her padded steps trooping down the stairs toward us. Kevin was already relieved. We all looked at one another like parachuters readying themselves to take the plunge from the airplane. “OK, boys, behave yourselves,” Will added as precaution as Sally’s slender hand turned the knob from the other side.

She pulled the door back, her pretty face wrung tight in a genuine smile. I threw my cigarette down and stomped it out to make Smokey proud. Her eyes were lit up, ‘cause her admiration for us was truly out of this world.

She beckoned us to take off our boots in the foyer. It was lit by a low-hanging chandelier crafted from fine crystal. The three of us were trying hard not to lose it. I had the sudden sense that we had walked into an afterhours museum. There was that unnerving quiet about Sally’s house all the time. There was no way we would be able to follow the rules. We were falling about just trying to take our shoes off our feet. But I knew once we got up the three flights of stairs, we could let loose. It was just enough to keep me sane. I was gonna make it.

Then Sally’s high-pitched scream echoed in my ear. “It’s just the guys, Mom! Will and Brendon and Kevin. We’re going upstairs for a little bit!”

“What the hell did you scream in my ear for? I didn’t even hear her ask nothing! Jesus Christ!” I said, secretly noting how she referred to us as “the guys.” We were just about the only male friends Sally had, her being too prissy and all for anyone to really hang out with her.

“Sorry,” she whispered, and even in my cloudy judgment I could tell she was sincere. We had been knocking around like The Three Stooges but had finally succeeded in getting our boots off without breaking anything. “Come on, you guys, let’s go upstairs.”

She wasn’t wearing a dress, but she did have a skirt on. Will and I shoved each other for position in order to be the one who got to look up it as we scaled the flights of seemingly endless steps. He won and turned around to give me a smirk to let me know it.

The three of us were already laughing like grade-school boys by the time we’d reached the second floor. On the way to the third, Kevin missed a step and fell, barely catching himself with his hands. Too late, we’d lost it. But it was like the elements were conspiring against us. We’d really tried hard. Kevin stood too quickly for his sight to handle, and we all raced at top speed through Sally’s bedroom door, slamming it behind us.

Sally gave us that smug little look of approval. I could tell our presence had livened up her dull evening. I was also aware that it was getting harder and harder to focus on anything. The ceiling and the floor had taken to spinning in opposite directions. And her room was filled with girlish decorations of every sort. It was an affront to my magnified senses . . . splatterings of pink and white everywhere like doll vomit. Even under normal circumstance, her room never settled right in the pit of my stomach.

“What are you, blind?” Will announced, and I could tell he was just as put off by the brightness of the room as I was.

“What?” Sally asked, having no idea whatsoever what Will was referring to.

“You got practically every light in the world on in here.”

Sally said something like “oh,” and went around turning each one off until there was only the one

lamp on, atop the nightstand beside her bed. Her room was huge. It was the whole floor of a converted attic. Besides the canopy bed, dresser, and other usual furnishings, Sally had a sectional sofa equipped with an accompanying coffee table. That's where Will and I took refuge while Kevin made a beeline for the bed. Leaping with two-footed agility, he plopped facedown, burying his swirling head in the satin pillow sheets.

Sally waltzed over to me and Will in a prancing sort of way. Christ, she was such a sophomore. She was definitely enjoying the attention as much as we were enjoying the comfort of four walls, a ceiling, and a floor. "You wanna listen to music?" she asked. We nodded unenthusiastically, since we knew she only had crap.

She put on some pop album she'd recently purchased and took a seat between me and Will. It was the first music we'd heard since we'd starting tripping. It sounded strange and faraway, like it was coming from downstairs. But still the notes got into my head. It was infectious. The quirky beats and the singer's bubblegum voice exploded. In a fantasy, I saw hundreds of little gnomes dancing around to the beat. They were locking arms, doing the swing-your-partner routine. I could see the whole magic land they inhabited. And I knew I'd probably go out and buy that horrible album the next day.

We bullshitted for a while on her couch, keeping as coherent as we were capable of doing. We made fun of every nobody we knew in school, teachers included. Sally was hurting from laughing so hard. She didn't try to make her own jokes—too insecure around us. Her cropped, curly hair was shaking with the motions of her chest. She really was a pretty girl.

Kevin hadn't moved from his frozen place on the bed. Head buried farther and farther in the pillows, he was flying through some dream vision . . . exploring the many tunnels that the acid had opened for him. Best to let him lie, even though I was missing his company.

Will leaned over and kissed Sally square on the mouth. God, the courage he had. Certainly we had fooled around with her before, but man, to just lean over and kiss her without any leading up to it. It just killed me the way he did things sometimes. I could see the Romeo streak taking light in his wildfire eyes.

Sally responded in the positive. She leaned over to return his kiss, but he stopped her, saying, "Kiss Brendon, don't kiss me." She looked at him uneasily. Then she smiled. She looked to me. I tried not to look too closely. Whenever you trip, people's faces don't look quite real. It's like they got rubber masks of their own faces on. Still, I wasn't about to stop her from kissing me.

She did. Closed like the one Will had given her. I jammed my tongue in her mouth as she pressed her lips to mine. I kept my eyes shut tight so I wouldn't have to see her expression, which was probably welcoming even if it was startled. It was the first time I'd really closed my eyes tight since I'd taken my hit. I had almost forgotten that when you close your eyes, you're immediately transported to some foreign dimension, and any hold on the reality beyond the closed eyelids is momentarily lost. I quickly opened them again, afraid of what I'd seen when they were shut, glad to see Sally's close-range face even if the acid did magnify every pore on it.

"Let's play Jesus," Will offered. Sally smiled, though I knew she had no fucking idea what the hell he was talking about. I knew because I myself had no idea what he was going to say next. He had his way of pulling the craziest shit from out of God knows where and flinging it in your face like you should know from the get-go what he was talking about.

"You know! Let's play Jesus. You're the Virgin Mary, and Brendon and me, and maybe Kevin if he ever gets up . . . we're the Three Wise Men. You take off your clothes, and we look to see if there's a baby coming."

I started laughing right off. Sally joined me, but I could tell there was nervousness in it. She

wasn't sure if he was kidding or not. I knew he was kidding, but if she would agree, he'd be more than serious. She liked Will and me and all, but Kevin kinda frightened her. And being as though we'd just heard the first peep out of him in some time when he heard Will's comment, it didn't help to ease her any.

She never did take off her clothes, not that I ever expected her to. In this quivering tone she told us that there was no way, and I thought maybe the whole fooling-around thing would be called off, but both Will and I did manage to steal a little more attention from her before she had to show us out at her mom's request. Sally had to straighten herself up when Mom came banging on the door. Her hair was disheveled and she had a guilty look on her face. Will and I sat there, our faces stuck in that lockjaw smile. Kevin was still half passed-out on the bed. Sally's mom stepped into the room, and true to form, I was the only one who said hello. She gave us that smile, the one that says, "Nice to see you. Have you misfits been fondling my daughter again?" She told Sally it was getting late and her friends had to go now. It cracked me up how wholesome they were. The way she couldn't come in like my mom and say, "What the hell are your friends still doing here? Tell them to get out before I throw them out."

We took our cue. After Sally's mom retreated back into the walls from which she came, Will and I went over and shook Kevin out of his paranoid coma. He had spent the whole time he was peaking facedown, drooling on Sally's bed. I shook my head, not knowing how he could handle that kind of nightmare.

IT WAS JUST AROUND MIDNIGHT when Sally locked the door behind us. Luckily I had phoned my mom earlier and told her I would be staying at Kevin's. My brain was fried. The cycle was spinning down to the tail end. We'd given Sally plenty of stories to go bragging to her fifteen-year-old girlfriends about . . . the old "guess who? guess what?" and all that. I was sure I'd hear about some of the things I'd forgotten. Gossip could be good that way. Sometimes it helps you learn your own secrets.

We lit about five cigarettes each. Smoked 'em one after the other. I was getting the shakes pretty bad. That was from my system running down, working the poison out of my body in slow motion. I knew there'd still be the occasional kick start, though. The acid would inch back up even after it had faded from peak. We were all still pretty fucked up and it was still steady. But as the night made its way into early morning, it had taken on an edge.

We cut over and crossed by the Liberty Bell. We pressed our faces to the bulletproof glass protecting it. Part of me wanted to kick that glass in and ring on that bell until it shattered, until the people sleeping in their beds out in Jersey could hear it. But that was an impossible dream because the bell's off-limits. It's like they were already planning for the time when it would be dug up like the Colosseum. Our breath fogged up the glass until ole Liberty frosted out of view and disappeared. It wasn't worth the effort to wipe the glass, so I turned away.

Alone, I went over to the center of the park and stared across the street at Independence Hall. If I squinted my eyes, it looked a little like a model. The air was cold and gave every object a strange icy halo. I raised my featherless arms to my sides. I wanted to change the constitution of nature and take to the sky on ashen wings. I'd fly to the tower and back two hundred or so years. I'd watch the cannons being wheeled along the cobbled streets by men in red wool coats. Bricks would fly as ammunition and strike them, and I would remain abstracted above it all. And when the war had ended and there was nothing more for me to see, I'd fly even farther away . . . bull's-eye through the counterclockwise clouds spins on my way to the distant stars.

Under the alterations of LSD, this dream felt near, or at least for a few brief and happy seconds it did. It was never-lasting.

Will and Kevin came sauntering quickly across the park, capturing my attention away. They were moving real quiet but they were also moving real quick. "There you are . . . we thought we lost you," Will said, laughing. "We didn't know where you went. Man, I thought you just went to take a piss."

I could tell they'd probably looked behind every bush for me. Their faces were hiding a secret. I could see mischief written across their expressions. They looked like little kids who'd just found a porno mag in the woods.

"What've you got?" I asked.

Will was rubbing his hands. He spoke in a singsong tone when saying, "Nothing . . . *but Kevin's gotta joint.*"

I think we literally jumped and danced, hollering at the top of our lungs. We had deteriorated into a roving madcap gang when Kevin produced the perfectly rolled paper from behind his back. It was as if our strung-out senses couldn't handle this kind of temporal overload. My trip had been getting too reflective for my own tastes. A little weed was just the boost I needed.

It only felt right that this journey toward freedom of consciousness should start where it did. Right on the site of the Revolution. Man, sometimes I get a real kick out of history. It's like all these loose blocks just sitting around for you to pick 'em up and make what you want from them. When

Kevin sparked the flame of my lighter, I watched the way the joint burned, and I felt that somehow we were all connected to it through the smoke it gave off.

We passed the joint in step as we headed off into Old City, the fifteen or so crammed blocks down by the waterfront. On a whim, Will had taken to goose-stepping. The soles of his heavy boots clanked down hard against the stones. The sound echoed wildly through the empty tunnel of streets. From streetlight to streetlight, our shadows went through alterations of growth and decline. Will's lengthening shadow would make the most obscene sight as he marched in that spindle-legged way. Through the clouds of smoke that we released, the whole scene took on an eerie horror quality.

Kevin kept making these weak-throated roars, attempting to soundtrack the event. Anyone listening from their apartments would have thought a couple of criminal lunatics had been set free. I started imagining the different kinds of creatures that would be lurking around the next corner. I took to whispering their descriptions to Will and Kevin . . . "a sawed-off troll with plaster shoes . . . a mutilated ape gnawing on aborted limbs," and such, so forth, and so on. We were really working the rhythm of it. So much so that I was getting far too bugged out. I was buying hard into my own fiction.

I had to call off the whole show and find a seat leaning against a closed shop window. Best to stop the production before it got too real and too late to shake. I needed to chill for a minute. The marijuana had gone to the head like a rocket on account of my toxin-washed veins. I had developed a minor case of drying sickness. My hands involuntarily caught up in muscular contractions. The influence of various narcotics within my body produced a glorious numbing effect on all the nerve centers. And everything around me had a glazed appearance.

Will took his place at my side, fitting himself onto the cold cement. I looked over at him but had to turn away. His face was turning around in circular shades of greenish gradations. I felt my spirit drifting off on some nomadic quest, and every time I grasped to reel it back in, it only roamed further.

I wasn't even conscious of speaking aloud, but I was saying, "Whoa horsies, Whoooaa Hoorsies" over and over. Will was in a fit beside me. This was our little phrase . . . our personal mantra for when high had gotten a little too crazy.

Kevin looked down at the two of us sitting on the ground. He looked us dead in the eye. How he was able to keep a straight face was beyond me, knowing what he was going to say next. But he had his way. He took one last toke on the joint before it burned his fingers and then looked at us flat, his stance taken from an old 50s movie. I was trapped in a chorus of "whoaaa horsies" when he hit us with "little Lex Luthor on a pony." Man, he could be so suave sometimes. I mean, to just shoot shit from the hip like that and say it like he meant business, like it was the most important piece of information that we were missing.

Will was in contortions by then. Carried away with excitement, he called out at the top of his lungs, "Caught your mom, who bought it from the grocery!"

This set off a chain reaction of nonsense quotations. We took to chanting the whole bit to some imagined meter: "*Whoa Horsies, Whooa Hoorsies! Little Lex Luthor on a pony, caught your mom who bought it from the grocery.*" We went through nearly twenty verses. Singing at full volume, sounding like drunken sailors on leave.

That was about the last true storm of acid that night. When we'd exhausted the pleasure from the song, we'd used up the reserves. Oh, the residuals were still there alright. We didn't have any clearheadedness. We could still feel the tingling in the spine and the tiny distortion in vision. But the moment had passed, and we were running full speed down the spiral. It was a relief in many ways. It

was always like that, good to be back on the ambulance to feeling well.

Kevin's house was just south of the bridge. We wandered for some time around Old City before going back there. We wanted to make sure we completely walked it off just in case Kevin's mom or dad was waiting up for us. It wasn't likely, but it's always better to be a little later for safety's sake.

It was just after three in the morning when we arrived. Rise-and-shine was only four hours away due to it being a school night and all. We were tired, but in no way was sleep in the forecast. It's near impossible to sleep after you've tripped. Soon as you close your eyes the drug builds momentum all over again.

We went through the motions of going to bed. You could hear the late-night cars traveling back and forth. Their high-pitched hum made it difficult to concentrate on sleep. I washed the sweat from my face and urinated for five straight minutes. I was flushing the evil out. It finds exit through the pores and the bladder. It was a good feeling knowing even though I might not be able to sleep, at least I'd feel clean.

Will and I took blankets from the hall closet and threw them into a makeshift bed on the floor. While Kevin was in the bathroom doing his nighttime routine, we stole the pillows, off his bed, figuring he already had the bed, so why should he get all the nice soft pillows, too? Surprisingly, he didn't put up much of a fight when he got back. I guess he saw the logic of the situation.

The three of us lay there in the dark and talked about the different ways we'd commit suicide if the urge ever struck us. It's not like we were infatuated with death or that we were depressed in any unusual way. It was just that the prospect of living a long life seemed like such a chore. Just so damned bored with everything! When I was younger, I remembered seeing a band logo that read, "Live Like a Suicide!" And I guess that's sort of how we felt . . . young and reckless because nothing ever mattered in the grand scheme of things anyway.

Will had just finished telling us how he would go with a gun to his head. *Boom!* Erased in an instant blast of glory. His thinking was that if you were determined to go all the way, might as well go and do it right. Send the brain out the side on the express train. Snuff it all in a little spark of powder and a twitch of the finger.

I could never have done it that way. The image of human tissue infected with metal was too much for me to stomach. No, I would plug the exhaust pipe of an automobile and keep it running in a close garage letting the carbon monoxide wash over me and lull me to sleep. I explained to them my belief that, in death, the soul lived forever in the last living thought. My way, you could die painless as you slept. You could even have music on to set the mood. My way would mean dying happy. With a bullet the last thought is inevitably fear and pain. I told Will I knew I didn't want my soul living forever caught up in that baggage. He nodded in his way, but it wasn't in agreement. It was out of sympathy and acceptance of ideas. That was enough for me and I let it lie.

Kevin didn't participate. He'd wrapped the covers over his head. I doubt he was actually asleep, but there was no need to press. The sun was somewhere just below the horizon. I closed my eyes and struggled with the internal visions. Patterns emerged in every direction and I shook them off in turn. I could hear the continuous motor hum of cars driving from state to state across the bridge. And for the first time I realized that it was now Friday.

I tossed and turned, trying to relieve my cramped legs and stiff back. I ignored the cold sweats and sleepless anxiety that crept up. I rocked back and forth like a baby or a trauma victim, saying over and over in my head that famous line, "Hurry up, please, it's time. Hurry up, please, it's time." The

bar was closing down. Last call. No more waiting for a table. No more stalled engines. My mind was free to go where it would . . . released from all chemical authority. It was the old 'bye for now, catch you again some other day. I had nothing left to give. I gave up all resistance, but somewhere deep down there was a stirring calm that assured me that all was going to be okay.

BY THE TIME THIRD PERIOD HAD STARTED, I was like the walking dead. My eyelids drooped like rocks were tied to 'em. Heavy outlines circled 'em, and I looked like shit. Kevin hadn't had any clean clothes for us to wear because he never bothered doing laundry, and there was no way I was going to put on any of his grimy clothes. Will and I just switched our own shirts, but even that wasn't much better. We'd sweated through those in the previous night's reflux, so instead of my smell I had his. And smell I did, but I consoled myself with the fact that certain chicks dug that shit. Or at least that's how I tried to console myself.

When I woke up in the morning it was the first I was aware that I'd ever fallen asleep to begin with. It goes like that sometimes, you never know you've slept until you're damn sure you woke up. I felt like I'd been run over by a truck. My whole body ached and my stomach was screaming for food. But when I saw myself in the bathroom mirror, my whole appetite went the way of the water in the drain. My first clear thought was, *Well, I survived another one.*

As I sat in class, I wasn't able to keep focus. I was barely hearing the teacher ramble on about this and that, something or other to do with diseases spreading through Southeast Asia. On any other day it might have been fascinating, but on no sleep it was just noise. Noise and the stupid need for attendance. I had thought hard on cutting, but my mom always checked up on the days I'd spent out, just to make sure I was keeping my promises.

Kevin had fought with his mother that morning about what time we got in. He said around one, which was a lie, and she called it a lie, too. She'd still been up then. Truth was, Kevin just wasn't sure what time it was when we'd gotten there. But he sure as shit knew it weren't no one o'clock. And like I said, so did his mom, and she called a spade a spade. But it wasn't like she got real mad. She gave one of those parental looks of disapproval and left it at that. I was just always amazed that we could stay out that late anyway. My house, it was eleven on a school night. That's why my mom checked up. She knew that I stayed out in order to stay out. And that's also why I hadn't cut because I wanted the policy to continue that way.

The first two periods had been real tough. First period I had gym class, which was a cruelty in its own right. No sooner had I put the last of my effort into getting dressed and getting to school on time than I had to go through the reverse all over again. Not that I ever participated in gym activities anyway, but still I had to go through the motions of putting on even dirtier clothes.

We had played some twisted form of dodgeball that the instructor thought up. The jocks had been real into it. They were chucking foam balls from one end of the auditorium to the other at full velocity. I got hit hard in the head within the first ten minutes. I sat on the side the rest of the period. I think I even nodded off for a stretch because when it was time to go back into the locker room, the teacher came over and informed me that I'd lose credit for the day. Oh yeah that hurt me! Fuck him, anyway. Everyone knew no college gave a rat's ass what your phys ed transcript looked like.

Second period had been somewhat of a mixed bag. It was my world history class, which I usually enjoyed, but it started on the wrong foot from the moment the bell announced its beginning. We'd been assigned a one-page essay to be handed in that day. Naturally I hadn't got around to writing it the night before, being busy with other, more ethereal things. The teacher hadn't taken too kindly to my secondhand excuse. I was a good student, really. She didn't appreciate it when good students blew off assignments. I was too tired to honestly feel bad about it, though.

Since the teacher had soured on me, I took myself out of the class discussions for the day. I didn't really have much to say, regardless. But like I said, it was a mixed bag, because second period was th

first class of the day that I had with Melissa.

~~—Melissa was that adorable type of girl. Intelligent and quick. She stood out from the rest. A tiger in a desert. A bird hovering above the sewage. The kind of girl who is so attractive by the simple fact that she has no idea she is attractive. She had the kind of strawberry-color hair a guy could go nuts staring at all the time. That's what I did. I went nuts staring at her all the time.~~

She was the one haunting my thoughts in those moments before sleep. Filmstrip dreams of us in the sunset of some foreign scene. Faded photographs of a future with me and the life we lead. She was the one of fantasy, of make-believe, and I felt so damn stupid for all the dull things I said to her when I spoke.

Even though at times I thought the extent of my crush was incredibly obvious, I didn't think she really had any idea. I sat a few seats behind her and spent the whole class mesmerized by the way her hair clung lightly to the back of her neck. God, how I wanted to just stand up, walk over, and place the palm of my hand there and whisper to her that I loved her. But for better or for worse, that just ain't the way it's done, and whatever the right way was, I was completely in the dark.

My friend Ryan had dated her the year before. Ryan was about the nicest guy in the world when it came to friends. But when you were dealing in boyfriends, he could be subpar. Not to say he was abusive or that he cheated or anything like that. It's just he could be oblivious to things that were hurting.

It had been that way with Melissa and him. I think he really cared for her, but they just weren't a match. I had been friends with both of them during the ordeal and even before, so it was hard seeing one friend upsetting the other so much.

Usually when that type of mess happens, I try to stay on neutral ground. But when the shit was going to hell between Ryan and her, it had been different. They always bickered and he picked on her and all the rest. It was impossible for me not to take sides.

Melissa would always come over to my house, her eyes pink and swollen with tears. I'd listen. Sometimes we'd talk straight through until morning about all sorts of things. We had so much in common . . . so many of the important things that mattered.

She would lie on my bed, sobbing beautifully. Fighting through tears once, she told me how she and Ryan fought because she wasn't ready for sex yet. "Not that I'm a goddamn saint and won't ever have sex. I just want it to be special . . . to be in love, that's all," she confided.

That was the first time I opened up to her. I told her that I was also a virgin-in-waiting . . . saving it for someone perfect. Kevin and Will were the only ones I'd ever admitted it to before. A guy has to keep that kind of truth a secret . . . too much pressure . . . macho-ness and all that hateful stuff. It was taboo to tell a girl something like that, especially one who knew the people you did. Lies get exposed that way. But Melissa was upset. Ryan had made her think she was some type of mutant. I couldn't bear to have her believing *that*.

When I told her "me, too," she acted surprised. It wasn't the knowledge that caught her off guard. It was the fact that I told her. She was moved that I felt I could trust her. There was an instant connection. We'd each found someone else who held tight to leftover romanticism. It opened doors for us to share all our fears and our dreams. She would speak about wanting children and how she was afraid of growing old and poor. And I'd listen . . . her voice like water as I kissed it into me.

During those months, I saw beneath the makeup and the pretenses and got to know her for who she really was. She wasn't selfish about it. She also asked me about me and not about what Ryan or anyone else might have said about her. I'd tell her how I didn't want to live past forty and she'd laugh not because it was funny but because she thought the same.

There was nothing fake about her. She didn't fly from scene to scene trying to stay up on the world of what is hip and fashionable. She wasn't like those party girls with mad style and nothing much happening up in the head. Melissa had the world figured out—she just chose not to participate in its chaos.

We were really close then, but it didn't last.

She had waited for me to say something for a long time, to tell her I didn't want her to ever go away. But I waited too long, I suppose, because by the time I felt ready, she was already telling me about some great new somebody else she had met. I could've told her then, and maybe she would've chosen me. But I didn't. I kept my love shut up. I faked enthusiasm as I watched her end up with someone else. I was left with just another acquaintance when I'd thought I'd found someone special.

I wasn't ready to give it all up. The fancy phrases. The uppers. The downers. The cages. Pretensions and persuasions. I loved the world of fantasies and miracles and flashy lights in dark spaces. With Melissa, I was only myself. I couldn't play the parts. Couldn't believe my own lies. With her, everything was so real . . . so sober. It fucking well scared the piss out of me.

Thinking about it all and staring at the curve of her posture, I wanted to go up to her after class and ask her out for the night or for the next night or the next week for that matter. I just wanted to spend whatever time I could alone with her . . . alone to look closely at her speckled green eyes. To tell her what an ass I had been and that I wanted to be rooted to her world if she'd welcome me. She had since broken it off with that other guy, and I didn't want to miss another opportunity.

For whatever reason I didn't ask her, though. "Too tired," I told myself, but in truth I was too scared of rejection. My inaction at the end of class was part of the reason why third period was worse than it should've been.

Halfway through our lecture on the death of Asia, I had looked around and noticed three or four other students with their heads down or just plain flopping back with their mouths open. It was reassuring to know that the teacher was boring the others to the same extent he was boring me. He was on his last year before retiring and had given up a long time ago. He read straight from the lesson plans he'd written twenty, thirty years ago. No reason to fight it any longer. I just followed the lead that had been set and let my head ease its way onto my desk. I looked out the fourth-floor window at the gray cover of midmorning, watching the pigeons squawk about on the ledge and letting myself drift away.

I saw Will and Kevin standing at the end of the hall between fifth and lunch. It was the first time I'd seen either of them since the walk over to school in the morning. That walk had been awfully quiet. The three of us had been talked out from the night before. With the prospect of school hanging over us, we had nothing to say. Even when we stopped at the convenience store for coffee, we didn't speak. It was an understood silence.

But when I saw them there at the end of the hall standing with Ryan and Taylor, I felt the need to talk to them. We'd spent over twelve hours the day before as a collective unit. When you go through all the phases of a trip with someone, you all kinda become one person . . . you can't function without the other components. All day I'd had separation anxiety, like a twin who was missing his other halves.

I sauntered over like I knew I was the shit. The look on my face let others know that these were my boys loitering. Best to get out of my way because that's where I was heading.

My presence made the group complete. Will, me, Kevin, Taylor, and Ryan. That was our crowd.

That's how everyone else saw us. And I guess that's sort of how we saw ourselves . . . in terms of the whole and less as individuals.

"Oh shit, Brendon, where'd you come from? What's going on, Brendon?" Ryan said, being the first to see me move in, making the square they stood in more of a circle. I always liked that habit of his, the way he repeated your name with every new thing he had to say.

"Nothing!" I replied, more to everyone than to anyone special. Will and Kevin had just been relaying the sequence of events that summed up our night. Only they hadn't listed anything sequentially because acid doesn't allow the brain to remember the experience in a linear frame. Will had a number of clarifications for me to make, and they were all glad I had walked by. I filled in as many of the blanks as I could, bringing the story together for Ryan and Taylor.

The more we went on talking about it, the more we were laughing. Me and Kevin acting out our own parts while Will narrated. Ryan was saying how he wished he'd been there. And Taylor wondering why they hadn't been. I saw it in the slight frown that formed on his face. It was the look he always had when he thought he'd been left out. Truth was, we hadn't meant to exclude them. We hadn't thought about it. They simply weren't around in the split second we'd made our decision. Nothing intentional. Ryan could have given two shits. He thought it would have been fun, but it wasn't like he held anything against us. I could tell that Taylor kinda did.

Taylor looked over at Ryan. "Where were we yesterday?"

"I dunno, we went over to Mary's house and screwed around." By his tone, I knew Ryan saw what Taylor was getting at and was trying to cut him off. Taylor probably saw it, too, because he let it lie. And when it really comes down to it, it was Taylor's own fault. He'd wanted to go over to Mary's instead of hanging with us. She was his girlfriend and Will, Kevin, and I hated her guts. No way were we going, so we ended up just the three of us, and the rest is history.

"Ahh, we still should've gone," Taylor mumbled.

"It was a fucking riot, of course you should've gone." Good ol' Kevin, he always missed what was going on under the surface. His romance with narcotics always came shining through. But something about his attitude was infectious, and just as he'd gotten me over the hump the night before, he'd succeeded in breaking the tension. For the moment, Taylor was over the "where and why wasn't I there" and was back on the allure of pure sunshine. Our conversation lapsed back into a five-star acid review.

I was distracted though . . . staring down the hall at all the strange faces and the ones that weren't so strange. My eye caught Plain Jane before anyone else had seen her. She rounded the corner heading right toward us . . . Plain Jane with the face so lame. I didn't even know what the hell her real name was. Will and I always called her Jane. Even to her face, not that she ever knew why.

She spotted us, but it was already too late. I'd nudged Will right off. Jane was one of Sally's little friends. Now Sally's friends ain't as bold as her and not even close to being half as cute, so we didn't ever pay them any mind. Which meant they didn't really know us none. When we did bother to acknowledge their boring lives, it was purely to torment. Poor Jane never stood a chance.

She was walking by . . . definitely Sally had told her a thing or two. That accounted for the look of young Jane's homely face once she noticed she'd walked smack into us. I saw her tense up. She always got frightened of us despite our pal Sally's pleas that we were harmless. But this time, Jane appeared more jittered than was usual.

Will must have noticed this, too, for when Jane got close he took the open opportunity. He jumped out from behind Ryan, who was tall and had hidden him rather well. He startled that girl straight crazy. I swear her skin near fell off her pointed bones.

He held her around the waist as we laughed. We all chanted “JANE! JANE! JANE!” Yelling right in her face.

“Get off me, you pervert,” she whined, but those types of comments don’t work past the sixth grade. We kept up the ritual incantation. “*Shut up*, that’s not even my *name!*” she rebutted.

“It’s your name now,” I flat-out commanded.

It honestly was a mean game, the kind a bully would play on the playground. But we were just trying to get some kicks and taunting people was about the only way to get them. Still, I guess it wasn’t all that mean. Shit, Jane got to tell all her impressionable friends that she knew *us*.

People began hurrying past in a rush. Will released his prisoner. Saved by the bell had never been so true. She sort of sissy-hit him as she shook away. We laughed more and waved. I stood there thinking what kind of ass had decided that it would be a good idea for seventeen-year-olds to share time with fourteeners. Poor Jane. I took comfort in the belief that in three or four years she’d remember us and finally get it. She had spirit, so I was confident she would.

Ryan and Will and Taylor took off, leaving me and Kevin going the opposite way. But Kevin’s class was a few doors down, so really I was alone again. I was headed to lunch, so I didn’t have to worry about being late and all. I dragged my worn-out feet. God how I wanted to just curl up on a mat somewhere and take a nap. I debated walking right through the front doors and then right on home . . . climbing into my unmade bed and then—just nothing. Hours of closed thoughts and nothing around. But the day was halfway over. I’d made it so far so good and lunch wasn’t any big trick. I picked up my feet like a tired soldier and marched on over to the sickening smell of the lunchroom.

It hadn’t taken much deliberation. Right before Jane livened things up a bit, we’d all agreed to take hits again that night. All of us this time. There was this party at a club over by the bus station. It was eighteen and older, but Ryan knew the bouncer and said he could get us in.

I was trying to figure out how the hell I was going to get any sleep between school and then. There was no way it was going to happen. Didn’t matter, though, the acid would wake me up when the time came.

None of my real friends were in the cafeteria. Usually I sat with this group of stoners I didn’t especially care for. Not feeling quite up to their company, I searched around for someone, anyone else. I was almost happy when I spied Sally on the far side of the room.

I was feeling pretty bad about the way we sometimes treated her. I decided to go sit at her table just to let her know Will and I weren’t using her. I really did think she was alright, even if she was immature at times.

Her face lit up like a firefly when she saw me pull the chair out next to hers. She smiled real big capturing the admiration of her friends. I could see it on their faces that my just being there was some sort of minor thrill. I enjoyed watching Sally wallow in the fame of it. She was the star of the day.

The others stared at me like I was some kind of celebrity. They were partially terrified, though. Each had that stung-by-the-headlights glare in their eyes, nervous as hell. I knew they spent countless hours trying to convince Sally that me and my friends were bad news.

I took up most of the lunch period thinking up things and making Sally laugh her ass off. All her bullshit friends didn’t get it. Inside, I knew Sally wouldn’t end up with those losers for long. She’d follow in our footsteps pretty soon. She’d carry on our legacy in this uptight school, because we were teaching her too much for her to just waste it.

I was being real careful not to lead Sally on. Last thing I wanted was for her to get some

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