

## **Father's Day.**

**June, 2020. Corbett, OR.**

I almost forgot the LSD gummies at the hotel.

I was in Ashland, Oregon, pulling out of the parking lot in my borrowed hybrid RAV4, a clear morning sky in view. I doubled back into the lobby.

"Excuse me, did I leave, a, uh, a, did I leave something — "

Receptionist: "Yes, here you go."

She hands me an envelope newly marked with my room number on it. Did she know? Shyly I took the envelope back.

I had left it in the mini fridge of my hotel room since LSD degrades under heat and light. And then I forgot it there.

I'd been given it on leaving San Francisco. Dad had passed from COVID six weeks prior, on April 24<sup>th</sup>. I knew I needed to get out of San Francisco. Deep into lockdown reality, an alien stasis had descended, freezing the city's rhythms. Art museums, bookstores, coffeeshops — my typical balms — were closed, closed, closed. I stopped working the day before Dad died. Life was pared down. I walked through the Golden Gate Park. I walked to the ocean. I went to physical therapy. I stood in long, slow, distanced lines at supermarkets. I visited friends in West Portal. I played video games. I microdosed on mushrooms. I cried off and on for seven days. I cried when I woke, remembering. I wondered when to tell people Dad had just died. I wondered how to be when I didn't. I learned the social script for talking to the bereaved. "I'm so sorry that. I'm so sorry for. I'm so sorry."

The six weeks went by in a fast, impatient, couldn't-come-soon enough blur. Like waiting for school to get out for the summer. Get me out get me out get me out. I didn't have a plan, but I did have instinct. Drive north, stay with friends, make it up from there.

On departing from my Inner Sunset sublet, a friend showed up with said envelope. I had figured the time window had passed to pick to up, but there it was, dropped off as smoothly as a Doordash dinner. It felt like paternal care. I could hear my dad: "Better make sure the boy has his acid before he gets on the road."

I drove to Forest Grove, west of Portland, and stayed with my close friend Cat, her husband, and their two kids. We went for walks in the verdant suburb, walking the same daily loop in person that Cat would walk when doing our daily checkup calls - she'd been calling every day since the death, at the same time, roughly 1:30p in the afternoon. We had spoken immediately before Dad died and immediately after, and then we'd just kept it up.

The calls started the day after Dad died. We were talking on the phone and I was still in my San Francisco basement sublet.

Cat, with audible honesty: "I'm afraid that I don't know how to go on this journey with you. I've never lost a parent."

My response was simple: "I think you saying that makes it OK."

And it turns out, it did. People like to say truly crazy shit to the bereaved. Crazy shit that sandpapers your ordinary sense of self down until you're a free floating ghost, invisible to most, radioactive from heartbreak. I inhabited a second world only a few people could see.

Low grit: "You know, if people weren't afraid of death - this pandemic wouldn't be such a big deal."

Medium grit: "I'm sorry for the loss of your Dad, as problematic as he was."

And the coarsest: "I know it might sound bad to say this, but the 100,000 deaths milestone doesn't bother me. It's just a number to me."

Sometimes, a string of random words out of the dictionary would have been more comforting.

But Cat's message – of "I don't know how to be with you, but I want to" – that worked for me.

On the visit Cat folded me into her family's life as I wanted. At some point my educator impulses kicked in and I found a used printer from Goodwill to take apart with her kids, a throwback to the days of running Camp Kaleidoscope. But mostly I did very little, and she was cool with it. From time to time during the visit I would lie in her guest room's bed and notice a sensation deep in my chest, like something was clawing at me from the inside out.

I did remember to take the gummies out of Cat's freezer when I left a week later. I drove from Forest Grove to Corbett, just east of Portland.

It was Father's Day, June 2020.

Dad loved acid. I loved acid. I loved Dad.

The thing to do seemed fairly obvious.

My friend Alex was my destination in Corbett. Alex is a loyal, slender, athletic man in his early 30, a few years younger than me. His demeanor is sincere and awkward. It is clear, whether or not you are interested, that he is being as transparent as he can be. And while he's not my type, he's been a crush to enough male friends of mine that I nicknamed him "gaybait jailbait." He was in Oregon because he followed a then-girlfriend out of the Bay at the start of the pandemic. First to Nevada, then Oregon, where they dated and fought. (They fought a lot.)

He was living in an RV on a property not far from the Columbia River. There was a main house with parking out front and a small octagonal shed that Alex used as a makeshift office for writing software in during the week. Behind the house was a hill with a trail on it that led to a lush, overgrown field, and if you kept going the trail took you straight to an outlook where you could gaze out over the Columbia.

It was a beautiful summer day. Warm weather and blue skies. Alex's home was fairly isolated. There were no other houses in sight. It felt like a good place to trip, make noise if you needed to, and not have to worry about what the neighbors would think.

I setup a makeshift altar for Dad in the octagonal room. I took out the 3" x 4" black and white photo of Dad that Aunt Nora had sent me. The one that featured him as a little boy holding a birthday cake. The one that caused me to started bawling at one in the morning when I first saw it. The one that I told "I'm so sorry I couldn't keep you safe."

The envelope contained four gummy pineapples, each with the same unknown amount of acid on them. The pineapples were colored with the synthetic gradient of reds, greens, and yellows that you only find in candy stores.

Alex's girlfriend decided to join us tripping and we all took a full gummy. His girlfriend went her own way into the field and Alex and I walked toward the river.

We walked past the house and went up the hill and through the field. That's when the body load hit.

I felt heavy and full, overcome by an urgent and awkward need to shit. Shame kept me from speaking to Alex directly, but making it to the river felt impossible.

"I think I need to go to the bathroom" I finally blurt out, while looking around to see if I can shit somewhere along the trail. There were houses everywhere. I wasn't opposed to shitting in front of a house.

Alex, slowly, deliberately: "Well, I think we should go back to the house then."

We turn around. I can walk, but it's hard. I feel incredibly heavy. We make it back to the field and I collapse on the ground.

A hot, painful ripping sensation flashes through me, piercing from head to tail. I wail.

Alex stays with me. He's attentive, quiet.

And then it stops - as quickly as the storm came. Zero to sixty to zero. I get back up.

Making it down the hill feels like work. I feel too heavy to walk. I sit down on the trail and scoot on my butt down the trail slowly and with effort. Walking is beyond me.

At some point, Alex asks a question. "I'm wondering how I can best be with you right now, and what I should be doing?"

"What you're doing is great." I'm too consumed by my experience to elaborate.

"It feels like you're carrying something really heavy and I am trying to carry it with you."

"Just being with me is great. You don't have to do anything."

We make it back to the house. Another painful wave of physicalized grief rips through me. I'm thrown down to the floor of the house, crawling, staggering around. I make eye contact with Alex and tell him "Grieving Brutal."

It is all the language I can muster.

Alex goes out for a bit. I find the bathroom and eventually make it out of the house. We go into into the makeshift altar room in the octagonal shed.

Once we get in Alex says he wants to go check on his girlfriend. I feel instantly clingy.

"But you'll be back soon? You'll come back soon, right?"

"I'll come back soon."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

After getting Alex to swear to his return, I lie on the ground and worry. When will Alex be back? Will he be back soon? I hope he comes back soon.

My consciousness, regressed and intoxicated, is clear in what it wants. To have Alex near me, and to not be alone.

I am in this state of insistent, urgent, anxious need, when a new thought announces itself inside my skull: "I can fucking take care of myself." The voice sounds much darker and deeper than the voice of my worrying.

I stand up, full of energy, enraged. I have never felt this much anger in my entire life. I knew all the spiritual sayings – that unresisted anger is inner fire or determination or clarity.

But it is the first time in my life that I have ever felt it.

I want to break the windows in the room.

I want to go outside and smash every window of every car parked outside.

I later see a man on the hill and think "It's my choice not to jump him or kill him right now."

It is a ferocity I have never known in me. I feel liquid arms running along my back, and when my physical arms meet them, they turn into fists looking for targets. I hurl cushions. I break a metal broomhandle. I hurl more cushions. I feel like the ancient Ganesha statues, destroyer of obstacles, multi armed, and angry. Deeply, wildly angry.

How the fuck did I work so hard to be present for my Dad's death to have that denied?

How the fuck did I have any faith in a government that had no care for my father's life?

How the fuck did I think this was my fucking fault?

The gnawing in my chest I felt in Forest Grove uncoils, like an ouroboros that stops eating its own tail. Self-blame, guilt, and regret uncoil themselves into raw hot fury.

Something in me knows not to break every window in sight, not to smash car window after car window, despite the temptation. But beyond that I am hurling whatever I can in the altar room. The sound of a cushion slamming into the ground. The sound of fist sailing into a cushion. The impact. My rage making physical contact with the world. I am absorbed and intensely satisfied as it courses through me.

Eventually I punch a mattress leaning against the wall, only to realize it was a sheet of plywood. My hand smarts and the pain sobers me up.

I recognize that I am tripping, that I am very angry, and that it is worth taking a step back from the present moment.

I pause. I take a breath.

Some moments later, I kneel down in front of the photo of my Dad and start talking to him. "I didn't know it was possible to miss someone this much.

I just didn't know.

I had no idea.

I had no idea this was even humanly possible.”

The rage and sorrow start to quiet in my body, and I can feel something new happening inside of me. I start to feel a deep inner wellspring of vitality coursing up inside me. It’s like I was a rageaholic and now I’m the Energizer Bunny. I dart outside the altar room, surprised my normal foot pains and knee aches are gone.

I run back up the trail Alex and I came down hours ago, barefoot, uncaring about the discomfort of the pebbles beneath my feet.

I’m alive.

As I make it up the hill and into the field, I can hear Alex and his girlfriend. It sounds like the girlfriend is screaming in the distance, which for them is par for the course. I figure they’re just being themselves, on acid, and track them down.

When I find them I figure I must be grinning wide, because Alex smiles instantly. I feel like I’m glowing.

“What happened to you?” Alex asks, warmly curious.

I respond like a proud, victorious child. “I got really angry!”

Alex smiles wider. He gets it. Many of my friends, Alex included, treasure big messy feelings. I don’t have to explain myself further.

I leave them to whatever they were doing and finally make my way to the Columbia river.

When I get to the river, the LSD causes it to shimmer in high color saturation, with a slightly synthetic veneer. It’s like I’m watching the Columbia on a gigantic, stunning hi-def TV. I’m completely engrossed in sitting on the rocky ledge by the outlook and watching the boats drift down the river.

The rest of the day has an easy comedown to it. I find Alex and his girlfriend back in the field. We throw a stick around and get Alex to fetch it as if he’s a dog. I stare into Alex’s girlfriend’s eyes and her face morphs into myriad different women. Later she says the analogous thing happened when she looked at my face.

Typical summertime acid stuff.

The ordeal of the day is over. I feel great.

As the sun sets the three of us walk through the field, back to the Columbia. I’m amazed at how simple a walk this morning’s trial has become. As we gaze out across the river my eye catches a propeller plane with a pilot and a passenger flying over the river. Their flight looks so calm and carefree, and I am content to watch them fly as the sun sets on my first fatherless Father’s Day.