

Magic Theatre on Regent St.:

The 11th anniversary of an unforgettable night in late adolescence was recalled one evening under my lightbulb in Weru-Weru, Kilimanjaro District. The memory might well have been inspired by an imbibed tumbler of 'gongo: a Tanzanian firewater than tasted of charred plastic steeped in rubbing alcohol.

In transcribing the scribbled-out reminiscence of that lonely Friday night— names were altered but details preserved.

-2016



On Oct. 30th, 1969, I hitched a ride from Saint John, New Brunswick to the provincial capital of Fredericton with a busload of football fans from my high school. Having an appointment with an orthopaedist scheduled for the following morning, I had permission to skip afternoon classes, as did the fans enroute to cheer their team.

I arrived woozy from taking slugs of the cold duck that was passed around during the 1½-hour trip. As I stepped off the hot bus, the head momentarily cleared in the razor-sharp wind that cut through my thin jacket. After a few minutes shivering amid the jocks on the edge of the college football field, I trudged off through the dust-swirling streets towards the provincial university Student Union building...

The plan was to rendezvous with Brice K., a buddy from my former home village, who was working at the Lord Beaverbrook, the city's premier hotel. While waiting for my buddy to get off his shift, I took refuge from the cold in the SUB cafeteria.

Shy among students a little older than myself, I sat in a back booth chain-smoking Players while watching the co-ed girls bouncing up to press jukebox buttons (at one point mesmerized by a blonde girl twitching her blue-jeaned rump to the jugging Reggae beat of Desmond Decker's '*the Israelite*').

Before too long, I was recognized by a friendly Aaron N., another former villager who had recently dropped out of the college to take on a dope dealing apprenticeship. Big bearded and with hands in an army surplus duffle coat, he led me out into the cold to rendezvous with an older former villager and master dope dealer, Steve T. He lived with his girlfriend in a seedy apartment above the town's Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet on Regent Street. Waiting on Steve's sofa for buddy Brice, whose room was across the same street, I partook of the passed hash pipe...

Brice showed up directly from work— a little embarrassed by his recent haircut and bellboy uniform. After he changed into cooler attire, we took a short walk to a musky Head Shop ('*Here Comes the Sun*' rattling out into the street speakers) where Aaron bought a roach clip embossed with a skull. Back out into grit-lashing wind, we retreated to Steve's apartment.

While the mouth watered from the wafting aroma of Kentucky fried, the empty stomach was afforded 2 warmish Moosehead ales. Out into the sub-zero cold again, we walked back up to the SUB where Aaron peddled a few grams of hash.

With the stomach shrivelling over the smell of cigarette butts congealed in French fry gravy, I squeezed into the corner yellow Formica booth across from a couple of Aaron's doper acquaintances. Only once did they raise heads from folded arms—that was to moan along with the refrain of Eric Burden's *'Sky Pilot'*. Finally, at 11:30 PM with no further prospects, Brice was ready to head to his rooming house that was just across the street from Steve's apartment. With his roommate Greg, (also a petty dealer) away for the weekend, I felt lucky to have a bed—having expected only a spot on the floor.

Nearly numb with cold from the 20-minute walk, we made our way up the narrow steps of the decrepit building. At the end of the reeking top floor hallway Brice squeaked open a door to a cubicle with twin cots, separated by a nightstand upon which was a cheap record player and a clunky alarm clock. Above the dun dresser in the far corner was a black light, which Brice switched on.

"Cool," I said, hunching back on Greg's bed to admire the illuminated acid rock posters on the dingy wall.

"Wanna go back over to Steve's?" said Brice, pointing a pudgy finger at the window.

Exhausted and apprehensive of the medical appointment in the morning, I reluctantly pulled on my boots and shuffled behind my host back out into the icy air...

For the following 2 hours we finished a case of beer along with Aaron, Steve and his girlfriend in Steve's unheated apartment. After an hour, Steve's heavy-breasted girlfriend pulled his arm towards the bedroom leaving only Aaron, Brice and I listening to the record player. Just when I expected Brice was finally ready to crash— he made a suggestion:

"Wanna split a coupla tabs of mescaline? We can get some from Greg's stash. It'll just be 5 bucks a tab."

"I don't have any money," I said.

Don't worry," he said, "I can front them for now. You can pay me later."

I had taken a half tab of LSD with Brice the summer before. After a terrifying night hallucinating in the sinister shadows of our home village, I swore to never touch 'chemicals' again. But on this night, in the haze of alcohol and fatigue I again went along for the ride. Back to Brice K.'s rooming house cubicle, Aaron N. and I watched while Brice K. unlocked the dresser drawer and pulled a tinfoil ball from the back. Delicately pulling it apart, he extracted two pink tablets.

Standing over the kitchen counter Steve T.'s apartment, Aaron opened his jack knife and carefully halved the tabs on the cover of Steve's black notebook.

Well knowing I was apprehensive, Brice winked over at Aaron. “Com’on, man, mescaline is not a heavy trip like acid. It's just a mellow high.”

Waving away any concern, I took my share on tongue, and went back into the ice-cold living room.

At 1:30 AM, we sat under the harsh overhead bulb with the blunt-needed record player fuzzing in the background. Over the next hour, Brice and Aaron showed signs of mildly 'tripping'— giggling in odd turns of disjointed talk and twitching in reaction to honks from the street.

Meanwhile, I felt no apparent effect of the drug— only a gnawing hunger after a day of near foodlessness and the foul taste of too many cigarettes. Then midway through the album, *‘It crawled into my hand, honest!’* by the Fugs, I noticed flies—or what seemed the ghostly traces of insects—flicking about the icy room.

At that same moment Aaron, with his arms pulled into the sleeves of his duffle coat and winking obscenely along with the vulgar lyrics (*“Group grope, bay-bee!”*) looked like a bulbous-nosed pirate. The record itself appeared grotesquely warped— barely dragging itself around the turntable...

"I'm startin' to trip, man," I gulped.

"It's just a buzz, man," yawned Brice K. “Hey, I’m wasted. Let’s crash.”



In the passage back through the dim yellow streetlight to Brice’s room, the transition was complete. Within the sordid little room, strangeness blossomed like an alien triffid. When Brice K. flicked on the black light, the Head Shop wall posters quite matter-of-factly began to undulate. For the first moments settling back on the cot, I was mildly amused to be party to what seemed an inside joke.

"So they're designed for trippers," I chuckled, "Now I get it."

"Didn't you know that, man?" he scoffed, rolling to the wall in his blanket.

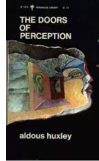
So was I about to enter a magic theatre like in *Steppenwolf*? Was entry “for madmen only”? I wondered whether I would have been better prepared had I more closely read the Hermann Hesse classic. At the same time, being too wasted to panic, I shut my eyes and surrendered to the cheap entertainment...

Yet every peek confirmed the worst: the walls were pulsing with dizzily shifting patterns. The only steady object in the room was the alarm clock. The loud metallic ticks jolted me to the dial: big hand on 6; little hand on 3....

So I was in a strange bed— just a few hours before a creepy medical appointment. I had been awake for 20 hours and now had a strange chemical circling in my brain...

"Hey, Brice?"

From the opposite bunk there was only snoring.



Thus began the most bizarre state of consciousness yet experienced. Before the dawn of the same bleak day, strange things ceased happening to a *me*— but rather, began happening to an *it*... From 3:30 AM until the bleak light of dawn filtered through the plastic curtains, I floated in a state of vivid semi-consciousness seemingly taking in every breath, revelations in Metaphysics 101:

Although I had I yet to acquire the terms to so describe the experience: for those hours, the subject/object distinctions seemed to break down and spiral away. Weird images and sounds jumped to attention with each pounding beat of the heart. What was left of the mind was like that of an infant or of a schizophrenic: tumbling in a wild wash of unfiltered phenomena. In the restricted vocabulary of the 18-year-old I would afterwards tell friends that in those hours: "My soul left its body..."

While I did not sleep in those hours— awareness, like a needle skating at the end of a record, seemed to be stuck on looping dream-like sequences:

The sequence most vividly recalled began with a camera pan of the inside-ness called '*mind*' caught in a shifting net of outside-ness called '*world*'... The "inside-ness" was connected to the blue dome of the sky by an invisible umbilical cord that stretched and twanged with every constriction of the heart. The cord rhythmically stretched to the starry sky and then snapped back to a skull-bound brain... A stentorian voice, rather like that from the narration of a Cecil B. DeMille bible movie, intoned:

"There was a seed, and the seed divided and grew, re-divided and grew again..."

Thereupon began the main feature: a parable of evolutionary cosmology barked out in an Ed Herlihy WWII newsreel voice set against *Fantasia*-like dancing flowers:

The 'origin' of vegetative growth proceeded very gradually, then with the blaring martial music quickened to a phase of flowering luxuriance wherein pods burst forth with milky sap and fruit. Then the growth-rhythm speeded-up—rather like a warped record pushed to 78 RPM. The wobble became a shudder, the shudder a wild jerking— whereupon a Hieronymus Bosch-like world rioted forth, vegetative life giving way to the humanoid:

From grotesquely ballooning pods, toothless dwarves popped forth. Bending over and winking obscenely, the dwarves defecated yet more freakish offspring... Then yet more hideous homunculi sprouted in turn, from ulcers on the creatures' neck and ears...

"F. is also a social being," the newsreel voice continued, "behold his multitude of 'friends' and 'acquaintances'!"

With that segue; old buddies from the home village, including Brice, paraded before me—obscenely in drag.

The newsreel narrator continued: *"Yet all that is really mirrored in each of these 'friends' is really only a few of the least disgusting aspects of himself..."*

The throat tightened within a background of a skipping Fugs' record while the kick line of village buddies in drag collapsed in a tangle of gartered legs. In a nauseous tuba drone, I clutched my neck in a wave of nauseous claustrophobia. Nearly suffocating, I clawed for something—anything—'outside' the skull-trapped brain.

Suddenly, I was in the open—soothed by full Wurlitzer chords on a warm windy plain, like *Mr. Tambourine Man*, under a bright night sky... The thought that this clear night sky with the brilliant stars that spangled it and the cosmos stretching infinitely beyond it—were 'outside'—was intensely comforting. I stretched fingers upwards and closed my eyes. As if by an invisible cord I was jerked upwards.

"Behold the dome of this sky", intoned the gravelly narration, "the edge of the dome is the glass ceiling: the inescapable edge of self".

Like a snake warming in the sun, a tantric energy began to uncoil from the solar plexus. Then suddenly I was yanked downwards. In the slow-motion free-fall, a stirring in the loins was triggered. I frantically tried to sync up with the blood quickening as I tumbled in free-fall toward a fountain of gaudy colours...



Suddenly sobered, I caught an icy breath. In a stark flash, a squalid bed setter was illuminated. Huddled under a khaki blanket on the cot across was Brice, still soundly sleeping. On the grey walls, the black light posters—The Doors, Quicksilver Messenger Service, Big Brother and the Holding Company—still flickered and fluttered. As grey light welled up through the plastic curtain, the tin alarm clock was clanking out seconds... The big hand was on 9 and the little hand on 7.

I bolted up in a panic. I had a doctor's appointment and I was still tripping! I groped to fasten my belt. The appointment was at 9:00 AM on the other side of the city, a long walk away!

Terrified by the wavering grasp of the Newtonian world, I pulled on my clothes. Leaving Brice snoring, I felt my way down the dark musky hall. Clenching teeth, I tried to ignore the Sirens whispering me back to indulge a little longer in the freak show...

Shivering, I creaked down the 2 flights of stairs.

Still far from sobriety, I felt like a psychic astronaut hurtling back from an unknown frontier. No less than Apollo crews met on the rolling deck by the Marine Band— surely I deserved a hero's welcome! My courage—had been no less tested than that of the vets who landed on the beaches of Normandy... *So where were the cheering crowds?*

As I stepped into the searing cold, a black car strobed past, shocking me back to Regent St., Fredericton, N.B., 6 ½-hours after I'd ingested, on an empty stomach, the half tab of what was supposed to be mescaline...

Across the street in Steve's apartment, the air was steaming cold. Stepping softly around ashtrays, empty beer bottles and Aaron sleeping on the sofa, I went to the kitchen to make a coffee. I creaked open the fridge and recoiled in the blast of spoiled milk. Finally finding the jar of instant coffee in the nearly empty cupboard, I stirred a spoonful of granules into warmish tap water.

The coordination of the simple action of bringing the cup to trembling lip seemed frightfully slow. Was my brain damaged? Could I even still read and tell time? I squinted at the grease-smearred stove clock. The doctor's appointment was in 30 minutes! Sipping my cup of tepid instant coffee, I blinked at the wall poster of Jimi Hendrix whose arm was furiously pumping his guitar neck. If only just by shutting eyes tight and clicking heels— I could wake up!

Puffing 20 minutes though the frigid air, I made it to the hospital clinic waiting room with just 5 minutes to spare. Feeling conspicuous in my dishevelled clothes, I tried to feign normalcy by leafing through a *National Geographic* but was rattled by Guatemalan Indians, winking and waving. When I tried to calm myself by looking at calendar on the wall featuring a drawing of Fredericton's Queen St. in 1870, from the stately elm trees skyscrapers began sprouting...

To this day, I wonder how I managed to get through the appointment— which was ordeal enough with faculties intact. The crew-cut orthopaedist who was prodding my spine— almost certainly knew I was stoned. If it wasn't the haggard wild eyes that gave me away, it was the chemical-smelling sweat that even the itchy palm of my hand seemed to be exuding. I felt dirty and defiled...



Later in the afternoon in the bathroom of Steve's apartment, I received a few parting winks from a *Playboy* pinup above the toilet but the undulations had mercifully subsided. Staring in the yellowish mirror I vowed that I would never, *ever* again take a hallucinogenic drug. I

also vowed that if my mind were still intact I would make some—some sacrifice— do some penitence. What came to mind was that I would be sensitive to the pain of animals and would never wear a coat made of leather.

Waiting for my ride back to Saint John, I sat in Steve's fusty armchair with the *Daily Gleaner*. The ability to read dialogue balloons in the Lil' Abner comic afforded some consolation that basic literacy had not been wiped out. On the sofa across, Steve and his girlfriend were lunching on Kentucky Fried.

"Yah wanna piece of chicken?"

With a shake of his Sir Galahad locks, Steve proffered the bucket that a day ago I would have ravenously leapt upon.

"No thanks," I said, still beyond the need for mere physical nourishment.

"What's wrong—you still trippin'?" he asked munching a drumstick with one arm around his heavy-chested girlfriend.

"If you really wanna know how I feel", I croaked, glancing over at his blonde girlfriend who squeezed slack-mouthed at his side, "I feel like I've been eating dog shit."

The girlfriend clutched at her big daddy's bicep.

Only by sunset was the dreariness of a chilly afternoon in late fall with crystal-clarity, restored. I was in the back seat of a Vauxhall driven by another villager— a straight-laced fellow my age who had already put school behind him and was a rising bank teller with a green suit to match his car. In the silence of the drive to Saint John I thought about the blue-jeaned girl at the SUB jukebox. I wondered whether there was a chance in hell in the following year, of still making it to college...

I was enormously relieved over the next few months to discover that the senses were not significantly blunted nor the curiosity killed. I reread *Steppenwolf* and read among other hip classics of the era—Huxley's *Doors of Perception*. It was intriguing to learn that the drug Aldous Huxley selected for his transportation into realms of exquisite transcendence was mescaline. Even in awe of his erudition I wondered just what degree of transcendence Huxley might have achieved in that squalid room on Regent St....

I did not keep my vow to give up eating meat but did keep the promise to never again take chemicals. Although I remained a social toker through college years, a couple of jarring flashbacks convinced me that even cannabis— for certain psyches—was not quite the "harmless giggle" that John Lennon described it to be.

In a final note: not long after that memorable night in fall '69, Brice's rooming house on Regent St. burned down.

Despite losing all their records and clothes, Brice and his roommate, Greg, were lucky to make it out alive in the middle of a winter night. Brice described how he had to crawl on

hands and knees down the smoke-filled hallway. He credited his avoidance of panic to familiarity with altered consciousness:

“It felt like I was trippin’, man!” he said.

1980, October, Weru-Weru, Tanzania

(From hard cover black journal with blue border, transcribed, 2016)

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