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## Alone Together

Robert Knox  
USA

He did not know what he was doing in the supermarket, a place with a tired, aging look and not particularly super. They were going, she said, to get a few things.

In this place, it seemed, they did not know each other, behaving like strangers on an unlikely first date, or pickups at a mixer when things had grown awkward. Of course they did in fact know each other, having spent more time together in earlier years than he cared to remember. But in the last year he has spent more time with college friends such as Matt, a former roommate whose apartment they were preparing to occupy, than he has with Pam, the girl who was putting items in a shopping cart she rolled with practice ease down the aisles.

Oreos. Vanilla Wafers. Cheese-somethings. She said the name quickly, as if everybody knew what it was, in response to his inquiry. Something super-American cheesy.

The boxes formed a growing muddle inside the wire fence of the carriage, like suspects arrested on vague, unknowable charges, and now hauled off to face their accusers. He wondered who was going to pay for all this.

“What do you think about chicken?” she asked, holding up a cellophane wrapped package consisting of the limbs of dead birds, which had been raised purely to offer their fleshier parts for sale in exactly this fashion.

He felt it odd to be expected to have an opinion about chicken.

“Do we need it?”

“We’ll have to eat something. Eventually.”

This was true as far as it went, but Jonathan found it hard to hold on to ‘eventually.’ When did it tend to arrive? There was no time like the present.

“What do you mean?” he said.

Silent sigh. “I mean do you like chicken?”

When he took too long to answer, his companion dropped the package carelessly back into the meat section from which she had plucked it moments before with such a hopeful gesture.

She pushed the carriage onward. Which increasingly felt to him like the tumbrel rolled to the guillotine.

The deal was (he reminded himself) they could stay in Matt's apartment for a whole weekend, all day and Saturday night. Alone.

Instead, that is, of hanging around Jonathan's dormitory room, either in company with or avoiding his current roommate and whoever the roommate had acquired this weekend for company. Matt, slightly built and with knack for both mockery and seriousness, had won permission to live off campus, an option ordinarily forbidden to all undergraduates, for his senior year by offering the deans' council a kind of monastic vision of withdrawal from the social distractions and obligations of dorm life in order to prepare himself to make sensible, responsible decisions for his future. It sounded good when you put it that way.

But the monastic, Jonathan sensed, had lately tangled with the mercantile, as his old friend turned to doing a bit of dealing to offset the expenses of maintaining an apartment-for-one in what he called 'the neighborhood.' He spoke of his pleasure in dwelling in the 'real world,' of walking the streets of the neighborhood to and from the campus. Jonathan wondered how much his friend was really part of this collection of low-cost housing and lonely streets that could feel troubling to traverse after dark. And the decision to move a few pills or a kilo of weed was the sort of thing one could manage just as readily on campus.

"You can stay here and trip," Matt had urged, by way of closing the deal. "Nobody will bother you."

Pam, clearly, was balking at the price of the tabs. The deeper problem for Jonathan was he could no longer discover whether he really wanted to do this thing or not. How had the conversation begun? Was it Matt's idea? Had he, unlikely prospect, come up with the plan himself?

But the idea of a place of their own for her weekend stay had apparently convinced Pam to part with a ten dollar bill. Once Matt was gone and they found the key he had left for them, and the apartment truly empty of breathing creatures besides themselves, Pam began a thorough reconnaissance of their surroundings for items of use – a startling initiative to her over-sensitive boyfriend, who regarded all private property as sacred (though also theft) and the prospect of extracting a tea bag from Matt's cabinets as a borrowing that would require replacement or recompense.

"What?" she replied, astonished. "He told us we could eat anything we found."

"He did?"

“Weren’t you listening?”

Often, it appeared, Jonathan was not listening. People told him of subjects, or whole conversations that had taken place in his presence while, apparently, he was off – surely not gathering wool, he had no use for the protective coating of sheep or desire to discover any – but, then, ‘day-dreaming,’ a concept so freighted that he could not begin to examine it within the confines of a friend’s apartment.

“No bread in the place? No crackers, cookies, anything? Does Matt really live here?”

“I think so. I can’t think of anywhere else he could live.”

“He doesn’t like have a girl friend somewhere? Who feeds him?”

“Matt?” Were they talking about the same person?

“C’mon,” she said. “I’m hungry, aren’t you?”

Was it time for lunch? Would the dining hall be open? “You want to go back to campus, see if the dining hall is open?”

This, to his own way of thinking, was a reasonable option.

“No.” She stared at him. “I want to go to the store.”

To his continued amazement, she pointed out that they had walked past the parking lot for a grocery store on the walk to the apartment. So it was he found himself a quarter hour later inside the Friendly Foodliner, trailing alongside the shopping cart.

“What do you mean?” she asked now. “You’ve never been inside this store?”

It sounded unhealthy and pathetic.

So after some thought, he offered, “I go to Liggett’s if I need something.”

“Liggett’s, Jon?” she replied in a tone of patient resignation intended to suggest a reluctant affection for the state of male helplessness her boyfriend exhibited, reminding him a little uncomfortably of the way she might treat a little sister’s demand for a bedtime story or the family pooch’s nuzzling for affection.

“Liggett’s is a drug store. You don’t eat drugs, do you?”

No, but drugs were often what he needed. Cigarettes, mainly. And the English candies his worldly roommate had taught him to crave. Weren’t they a kind of drug too? After all, when you were high, inevitably after some time the munchies arrived, squawking and waving their hands for attention and not to be ignored. You could go down into the bowels of the dorm basement and solicit the vending machines, as some guys continued to do pretty much every night, after

expressing vague surprise that they were feeling a certain craving and really had a jones on for chocolate or licorice, or some sugary coconut confection. Jonathan, the better planner, waited for those guys to leave the party and then fetched his supply of Callard and Browser's caramel, or toffee or other British flavor the existence of which he had not imagined until his roommate Bake's intervention into his humdrum existence.

He could not tell Pam this either.

And as for those primary drugs, weed and occasional pills, the dormitory itself provided a pretty reliable source for these. They could not get through many evenings without floormates or Bake's friends, who constituted a far larger network than his own, dropping in to share with them their latest find. Or purchase. Or gift box. Or some special little treat that came in the mail. There was Rookie, for instance, and his continually refreshed supply of Moroccan hashish. Maybe it came somewhere else, as others claimed, but Moroccan appeared to be a reliable brand name.

Not the previous evening, either.

Pam had by now spent several evenings in Jonathan's dorm room, with Bake and other friends, and while she was hardly shocked by the proceedings -- though sometimes being the only woman in the room might feel a little off-putting -- the real problem was...*the real problem*: Jonathan did not know how to talk to his friends when Pam was in the room. And he did not know how to talk to Pam when his friends were in the room. Why was that? He knew the problem had to be something he was, or wasn't, doing, since the only common variable to all these connections was Jonathan himself. Reduce terms and factor. He was the factor.

It gave him a headache to think about it.

But, he realized at last, this factor was also the answer to the question 'Why was Pam willing to dish out the ten bucks to pay for a couple of tabs of acid once the use of Matt's apartment was factored into the equation?' Answer: she wouldn't be dealing with both Jonathan and his friends.

Just Jonathan. *Who was he?*

She must be asking this question, just as he was asking the converse.

So here he was. She was. They were.

"Meatballs!" Pam said, in the manner of somebody solving a riddle or finding a four-leaf clover. "Meatballs and spaghetti. I make great meatballs."

Package of chopped meat goes plop into the carriage.

Who was paying for all this? he wondered. Wouldn't it be a whole lot easier, and cheaper (he wondered yet again), to walk back to the campus dining room if and when they truly got hungry?

But then again, they would be tripping. He could have forestalled all this, maybe, if he had pointed out to her that people tripping for eight hours, or quite possibly more, really don't get hungry. They get a lot of other things, but not hungry. Not really.

Has she ever taken LSD before?

When he tried to ask, she had cut him off. "Don't worry," she said. "I've been around."

You can be 'around' people who are tripping, he thought now, but being around yourself, your own mind, in that altered state was something quite different.

For most of a year, at least the semester, which really isn't a year, is it?, but felt that way because each new semester had its own sharply defined structure, 'the room' has been his life.

It was to the room, cohabited with his friend Lesley Baker, and the expansive companionship of 'Bake' (as everyone called him), that Jonathan fled in order to escape from the miseries of the previous summer when his longtime girl friend, the one essential person in his pre-college existence in the homely outer borough of Queens, unceremoniously dumped him. He suffered loss, loneliness, isolation, and an enduring *tsuris* of humiliation that he came to believe attached to him so strongly that other people could smell it.

It was as if some stray dog had pissed on his shoes, and he could not remove the odor, nor could he walk a single step on the stony road of life without wearing these particular shoes. He put them on, laced them up each morning, and stank of himself. He could not rid himself of the odor of rejection, inadequacy, friendlessness, loneliness, self-mockery.

When people looked at him they wanted to make a face. Turn away.

Sniffed the air. Walked the other way.

And, still, he'd held down a job that summer. Worked with troubled kids at the Hillside Teen Center. It was mainly intake interviews, but still you had to empathize, look people in the eye, make them feel safe talking to you. Maybe because they arrived with their own bad smells, the troubled teens who walked in the center's door, or more likely, were escorted, were too full of their own imperfections to notice his. Jonathan zipped himself up, spoke softly, listened to every word, and asked the questions on the form in front of him. A few of the girls even made

eyes at him. The guys he simply allowed to talk, those who wanted to – a remarkable number did, if you were patient enough – and he escaped from his own troubles by soaking up theirs.

It was only in his personal life, when he was simply himself, Jonathan Nobody, and could no longer wear the mask of The Listener, that he could not bear the company of others or the reflections of solitude. He drove the highways pointlessly on weekends, kept to his room at home in the evenings.

When college resumed, he somehow left the odor of rejection behind at his childhood home with the person he used to be and would never again wish or try or desire to be – and became his new persona: friend and sidekick of easygoing, friendly guy, college hippie, clothed still in the tweedish-prepperie jacket in which he had spent his own formative and miserable childhood, Les Baker... who told him, "Les is more, just call me Bake, everybody does." It was a relief, Jonathan found, not to think for himself. His course load, as always, gave him a routine, and hanging out with Bake and the latter's ever expanding network of affiliates occupied almost all of his free time.

He would do his reading assignments after dinner until Baker interrupted him with the identical nightly query, "Want to smoke a joint?" to which there could be only one answer...

Other gatherings would begin just around midnight. In his new-semester, new-life, he paid little or no attention to time. Slept through more classes more than he had ever allowed himself to do in the past. Decided attendance didn't really matter. Decided all that really mattered to his professors was that he wrote his papers.

Then, just as the semester moved toward its close, in tune with the annual year-end and somehow dramatic denouement of the holiday season – plus the first true cold: the steep-gouging, throat-stopping early dark of the shortest days –

Along with, that is, the hot blood – of what?... He really had no idea. Youth? Battle lust? Ordinary lust? As if each dying year were determined to go out with a bang: Something did happen.

A girl called him up. Her voice on the telephone.

A kind of instant decision presented itself. Slammed him in the puss actually.

She missed him (she confided). It would be different this time (she promised). They would connect on a new level (broadly hinted). A new giving was on offer, a commitment, the gift of herself (hint, hint, *hint*). She had, her voice told him, something to prove.

But was this really her? His Pam. His hot-blooded teen angel, who was also Mama's good girl, devoting every afternoon to watching over little sis while Mom was at work. Pam to little sis: 'Don't tell Mom that Jon was in the house.'

He had to think hard. How had she signed her letters in the past? He could check by looking at one of the many she had once sent him and demand a sample of her handwriting for purposes of comparison – except that, in a gesture of self-annihilation, he had thrown them all away. To weaken the hold of an emotionally mortal blow: There! I banish thee from my thoughts and remembrance. 'Rejection'? – I reject thee!

And yet it must be her – (Is this Pam Guglietti from 3224 Greenwood Avenue in Hillside?). Who else would say such things to him – how for that matter had she obtained his phone number?...But who else *would* call him? –

And, as the inevitable dialogue moved along, since he had not simply cut her off with some coldly superior denial (Woman I know thee not!) and slammed down the receiver.... Call him up, that is, out of the blue so recklessly and – get this – propose meeting him a mere two days hence in the apartment of a common friend, an old high school classmate, who happened to be going to a college not far from his own. (Genuine article or not, she was clearly up on the class alumni news.)

*Let me show you*, the voice on the phone urged. I'm ready for a higher commitment!

(*Let me take you higher!* Was she actually saying that? Or was that the coincidentally chiming message of a famously recorded voice proclaiming a higher truth from somewhere else in the dormitory?)

A moth fluttered in the streetlamp outside his bedroom window, desperate to get inside. Attracted helplessly to the light. A moth?—at this time of year? Or was that yet another sign, symbolic of his own state.

Dear god! Let the thing in! But he couldn't decide which one of them was the moth. What exactly was on offer here?

He heard himself agreeing to meet her.

One thing led to another. Then all these ductile somethings led to the obvious thing. They became lovers.



The meeting at the mutual friend's? Well, you'd have to say it was a success. Jonathan found her (Pam? she *looked* like Pam) enormously attractive. That was undeniable.

But she had changed in the time they had spent apart. She had grown up, he thought. Let her hair grow long and straight. Acquired (or gained knowledge of) all the latest, hippest music, and belted out the lead vocals with the female lead singers. Declared her independence from Ma.

What she could not do was make herself at home with his friends. If the gathering was in his room, that is to say Bake's room, with Bake's psychedelic record collection providing the sound track (along with some soul tastings, or whatever you term The Rooftop Brothers), he could not be so unfriendly, and cowardly, as to take Pam away and go off somewhere alone. To do what? A movie? What he wanted anyway was just to hang with Bake and his friends and get high and be there in case anything happened, and while it was hard to put a finger on it later, in the moment it sometimes felt that something worth noting or even remembering *was* happening. People were emptying their own guy-caves to crowd into his and Bake's room, or stand in the doorway to bang on something during the two a.m. jam along to "How High the Rooftops!"

The night (he recalled) when some guy living in a room across the quad had thrown open his window to shout, "Shut the fuck up!"

Pam had missed that moment. She was there on campus, of course, only on weekends. And when she was there, she was not herself (or any self) around Bake and his crowd. Subdued, unusually silent. As if afraid of putting the wrong foot forward. Similarly – cause or effect? – Jonathan lost his tongue as well. Sometimes he thought he was simply pouring his personality, as if it were sort of liquid solution, less fixed in his case than in Bake's or any of his college friends, into whatever convenient mold presented itself.

Why else, he asked himself now, in the supermarket of his soul, was he unable to confront the challenge – threat or opportunity – posed by the return of this mysterious woman, who once had loved him (so she said often enough), then had thrown him off without any apparent remorse or regret -- or explanation -- or anything.

And then returned in a new, more committed, outwardly mature, and – for the moment, at least – imperious version of herself?

And why did he feel like a mud puddle left over by a wintry rain, dwindling to a small chain of footprints down the sidewalk on the 'neighborhood' streets where his old friend pretended to live?

And why now, the whole weekend before them, did he feel so stupidly inexpressive in her presence?

In the end, back at the apartment, they decided to eat lunch, even though, as Jonathan pointed out, that would delay the drug taking effect. (*Are you experienced? Have you ever been experienced?*) Because when it did begin taking effect, he could not imagine their deciding to make lunch, handle utensils, put the jar lid back on the mustard, remember where the refrigerator was – since everything started to look all the same. Or decide to go out of doors to enjoy the wonders of nature, if they could find any in Matt's so-called neighborhood. Dear god, what had he let himself in for?

He carried the bags home from the store, the lug doing the luggish deed – was that where 'big lug' came from? – after she had paid for most of it. First asking him how much money he had on him, as if this point had just occurred to her; then taking all that he had and making up the rest of the total with her own. Was it... he began to think... playing house that she desired to do? Something she already knew how to do, and he rather obviously did not. See, honey, what a good domestic manager I am. Was he, then, in need of one? No, he was married to the university, if by domesticity we mean to say food.

They would swallow the pills, she said, and then make sandwiches. This would have the same effect of delaying the pills' impact, he warned, but that's what they decided to do. He took the tabs out of his pocket, carefully removing them from the tissue in which he had wrapped them – she watched him hawk-like lest he drop one, lose it. They were white and very tiny. He could not imagine cutting one in half, as they had sometimes used to do in the dormitory laboratory of the mind, even if he had a bare razor blade, which he did not. Shaving being at best an occasional pleasure in his half-bearded, half-stubbed state.

'It tickles,' she had said to him. She had claims on that face now.

Well, he had claims on her body too. Yet he had not given a thought to the claims of sexuality, pleasures of the flesh, since they had marched themselves from his dorm room to his friend's apartment in order to undertake their experiment in consciousness. So far an experiment in the routines of domesticity, that, as he discovered, began with the stocking of the kitchen.

It was so, (I don't know, he thought) beside the point.

What then was the point? These were the kinds of questions that came up. Was taking LSD truly, as Ram Dass had suggested, a spiritual exercise, work of devotion: was this his own

assumption? Or was it some kind of kick, or dare? What do you do for kicks? People said that, didn't they? What's it like? People asked. 'It's a kick,' the inquirers were answered.

'It's a psychic striptease,' he thought.

He who was shy about his body. His skinny, semi-tall body, that he waggled in dance, and used to play sports with, but now could not imagine anything more strenuous than flicking his wrist at foosball. Think how much more it made people self-conscious to undress the coverings of their minds, the undergarments of the interior self. The ego, the psyche, the soul, the layers of 'defenses' –that was a big word wasn't it? People had defenses, that did what – preserved the ego?The self-image.The self that 'the secret sharer'(in Conrad's Victorian fable) began to reveal, as in a mirror darkly?That 19th century sense that what you thought you were, O civilized man, was not necessarily the whole story. Perhaps not even the truer part of the tale. ... Were the people the writers were flaying in the books he was asked to read in fact much like the people being asked to read them?Were his 'authors' talking about him? Ifso, did he want to know what they said?

Oh, he was so brave, they were all so brave. The psychedelic revolution was *their* war, maybe. They went to the front. It was combat, but combat with their own minds. With 'consciousness.' No escaping that word, cliché though it had become. One learned how one thinks. An inescapable conclusion.

What the drug did (he was explaining in his mind: to somebody? *who?*) was slow everything down. You got to watch the muscle flexing of the brain-nervous-nexus and whatever other nameless, undiscovered processes were underway... You could not turn away; let some automatic function, mere habit probably, take care of the thinking. You were there when the sausage was made.

You could not turn away. Though, after a while, the you in you wanted to scream,"Bring back my defenses!"

Let me go back to whatever miserable hole I was occupying before foolishly throwing wide all these doors to the inner sancta of the soul.

*Please shut the doors after you, thank you. Thank you very much. Someone come in here and clean up the mess. The guards? Where are the guards? Get them all back, okay I'll double their pay, timeoff Tuesday nights as well and, when was it, Thursday afternoons? But I need them the rest of the week...*

Some of this was beginning to trickle back into his thoughts.

"Should couples trip together?" Matt had asked. "An interesting question."

"You mean us."

The little 'heh-heh' – how to translate that? "Yeah, you guys sure look like a couple."

And how would you know, ol' buddy Matt?

An interesting intellectual problem for his philosophical friend was about to become a real one, present time, for Jonathan

So were they 'off' now? Were they truly and officially, beyond any hope of mission-abort, off? In the day, he recalled, people would gesture, part serious, part as in a game or ritual, stroking the air with one hand before the altered senses of perception. Crossing the air with a single finger, or all the fingers of one hand, to see if the waves of perception-distortion had coalesced sufficiently to justify the hallucinatory criterion of tripping.

"The waves," somebody would say/ask. "Are you getting the waves?"

"Uhm. Not yet. A little wiggle up in the right corner," somebody, Matt, say, would respond. Thoughtfully, a little tentatively, as if giving the weather, but knowing that the prediction was spotty and the conditions might change at any moment.

*Oh, yeah someone else would say. Big rumble. Second bardo.*

Somebody would laugh, but the rest of us would have no idea what was meant by second bardo. It mean, apparently, that 'things' were getting heavier.

Then the visual perceptual sphere would begin to crinkle from upper left all the way down to lower right, and then maybe crawl back up from the obverse cross-section. Or maybe not. Or some other distraction would interpose itself.

Voices came out of the rain. It wasn't raining, was it? Jonathan glanced at a window.

Or, maybe raining outside, but we all were indoors, so what did that mean? Or something noised in the hallway, on the stairs, ..and then a slow debate about whether to put the record on. Which record, as if some esp/LSD playlist had been decided beforehand, and it was only a question now as to when to initiate liftoff. Never was. Somebody spoke, and then, depending ofcourse on who you were and Jonathan of course was only ever Jonathan, try as he might to be someone else, they answered quite clearly.

"Cavalry." No, that wasn't the name; it was one of their roommate in-jokes.

He found himself standing without remembering rising from a seated or reclining attitude, how had this happened? Who had initiated the command, suggestion, was something in the way of group movement taking place?... Syllables stretching now, the way the visual interruption, of doors opening within doors had begun some time ago; when, no matter. And now words could be interrupted into syllables, 'interrogated' as the professors said, the way existence itself could be; only now the words themselves, the very words unspoken but forming inside his thoughts could be *wondered at* ..but what if they were not his words, or syllables, or the sounds that were at the base of either, but the products of somebody else's mind and muscle and sounding board... Did that make sense?

'Board' –not bored. *No, not that.*

Was it possible now to risk sneaking a look at somebody's face (not your own), or was every face turning, shielded, from every other because to expose one's face was to expose everything, not only even those things too deep for words, but those too rancid... And if words were fast becoming useless, then what were we left with? ..in these, the most psychically communicative, the most telling of moments.

...Three cigarettes later -- on the afternoon of Jon and Pam's pretty decent adventure -- he began to feel something at the back of his throat, or maybe at the base of the neck, some overstimulation of the medulla oblongata?... and spoke to her: "Are you off?"

She stared. Her eyes narrowed slowly as, he supposed, she took in the words.

Nodded; something flickered through her brown-bear eyes. Yes, now he could see it, the intensity that was also a pure distraction, that concentration on objects (physical, or of thought) over which one no longer possessed any will. She was off.

He looked back at her face. Trying, for once, not to admire, but to discern what he saw there. Deep brown eyes, flecked almost yellowish. She said they changed with the light in the room. (But how would she know?) The intense, sometimes tense expression in the eyes and the upper part of the face: hurt, or hurtable... in contradistinction to the bold, cocky mouth.

Oh, she was on top of things in a supermarket, he thought. But what did she know about *this*? He almost said, So you still think this is a good idea?

But that would be to suggest it was a bad idea. And that, he was sure, was the wrong way to manage the take-off of a trip. It would, inevitably, lead to a questioning trip. To "what is the meaning of that which we are doing?" --and that would lead to all questioning, no doing. The only

answer he decided, having come to this point several times on previous journeys, was simply to do. He found himself on this point once again, as if recognizing a path in the woods. Though the woods were dark.

"So far so good," he said aloud. She looked at him without speaking.

"I know where we are," he said, either an act of reassurance, or a joke that only he would get.

Pam, his woman (was she?), continued to regard him, her eyes boring into his; hesitating, or merely thinking.

"Where are we?" she said at last. She tried to smile, but it didn't quite come off.

"Here." Another solecism; or joke. He was off, excited now, flushed with momentary confidence. He would pick up the trail from here and carry it forward.

"Here?" She turned her head slowly, unlocked her eyes from his. "We're in this -- this apartment.... And we're tripping. But that's all it is for me." A long pause. "So far."

Well, if that's all it is, he thought.

What did he like about her? Let me count the ways. The acid took the masks right off you, he thought; stripped you psychologically. Jonathan Small, for example: nice, polite young man. *Really, though? Was that it?* It was really quite rude. You said things under these conditions you couldn't otherwise; more importantly, you heard them. You said them inside.

So what was she? The essential Pam, without the surface attributes. Her laugh, her can-do pushiness, her confidence. Did she seem 'anxious' now; or was he projecting that?

Don't say that word, he warned himself. Never, never give the other a bad word.

"On this trip," he replied, at last. "This path."

Surely, she understands this. That one was not simply, in a purely physical way, here? Oh no, there was nothing in this room to hold on to; nothing in which to see the self. The floppy couch was ragged and worn; the walls and floors scratched in places. Mere things, studies in decay. The overstated political posters. What else *should* a room have?

A record player.

She asked, "Do you want me to put on another record?"

The request was ordinary enough. But, he couldn't help thinking, 'did she not see the road ahead?'

You didn't need anything. You waited for the road to take you.

And his answer to her question was circuitous, irritatingly so: 'No, I don't want you to; but, if *you* want to... And, no, *I* don't, but neither do I wish to say 'no' to you, or to anyone, under the influence of LSD, nor to close off any option that later might seem profitable to either of us. Nor do I wish to be expected to propose an alternative entertainment that I find preferable. ... The road lies before us, let us take it.'

How could he possibly say all that?... when it became increasingly difficult, second by second now, to open the mouth and make words.

Dry mouth, he thought. He recollected the sensation. Why was that?

When he looked her in the face again, she smiled at him, automatically. Nice girl, he thought. But was the smile simply a smile? On the day a room was not simply a room, a day a day, a companion a companion: all were stages on a journey. He struggled to get his footing.

Usually you laughed a lot, here, at the beginning stages. They didn't seem to be doing that. What was he, Jonathan asked himself, doing instead?

He was questioning.

Oh... a questioning trip. Well, that always happened. So wait 'a stage'? A necessary one?

"I know," he began, but almost immediately what he thought he knew collapsed... He was forced to look away from her, and could no longer wonder whether the uneasiness was hers or his, and could no longer study her face like a roadmap. Because now he was in the questioning place.

She took his hand. While his body was still turned away from hers, focused somewhere above Che Guevara's swaggering certainty.

"I know, too," she said.

"Yes, but what do you know?"

"I mean, here we are and all, and..."

He turned slowly and looked at her face. No bravado, no swagger there. No fear either, but a kind of -- he couldn't get a fix on it.

Things, her features, not an expression exactly, now that they were *off*, so *off*, were they ever... in fact, they were so quickly, deeply, down that road (thought how much time had passed?) that he could begin to think that they were peaking -- yes? could that be possible? the 'here-we-are moment' -- while a flow of movement, a stream of expression unfolding through her features... for that matter even the wall behind her seemed to be meditating, dialoguing on its

wall-ness ... were escaping him, outrunning his perceptions. He could get no fix on her expression, but a kind of: modesty, perhaps. Care, perhaps; but also knowingness.

Ah, he thought he understood, but a twist, or divergence, in the path before them took over his power of speech:

"Can a wall touch a chair?"

The question had come to his lips, unbidden -- and was out before he could think better of it -- from memories he would not ordinarily be able to summon.

Once spoken, it seemed to sum up inordinately precisely what was happening to them, each of them, and between them, though it likely meant nothing sensible to her; nor could it mean anything to anyone who hadn't studied Martin Heidegger with a perversely obscurantist German graduate student the year before.

The wall does not care, nor does the chair; but does she?

He thinks she does. And is it enough? She held on to his hand, appearing starkly puzzled (is he talking to me? does he expect an answer?), then shook her head.

Her gesture said, 'OK, man, maybe that's your kind of trip, it's not mine...'

And still, wandering down the familiar trippy road opened by that old teaser, he was called back to hear her say what she had to say: "Here we are and all. I understand. But the thing is, the trip is -- isn't it? --" A quick shake of the head, flip of the long straight mane -- "What does it all mean?"

He could not tell her. And the more he tried, the worse things got. Some considerable time passed by in the attempt.

It did not help that while it was still light outside the window on the fast-fading afternoon a patrol car pulled up at the curb below Matt's second-floor unit, its radio squawking so fiercely they heard it through the winter-closed windows (an invasion: aliens landing directly on your cerebellum)... Then, taking a peek, he saw a kid run across the street and down the opposite sidewalk. The cop car left, eventually, after what seemed forever, but Jonathan's consciousness had circled the wagons, piled the mattresses against the door, confessed his secrets in the public square, and seriously considered withdrawing to the bathroom with the kitchen knives and locking the door.

Or maybe the last idea was what *she* was considering.



She held his hand for two hours(not even leaving him to go pee), and often she was terrified in that time, suspecting that he was, too -- as if suspended over a chasm of nothingness, or, equally fearsome, confronting a blank wall of endless time and endless repetitions of blind alleys of consciousness. An infinitude of possible regressions. As if time itself were endless: an infinitude of time. Time was a prison: Time *being*, an endless present here and now. Time, time, shuddering time, time without end or direction, or purpose. An endless, meaningless present. *Would it never pass?*

What could he do to make it pass, to get it going again?

Occasionally, he would bob up and mutter, "What I'm trying -- what I'm trying to do..."

But she never caught the sense of his words, if in fact he had offered enough of them to make a sense -- or a sentence -- of any ordinarily meaningful communication. All of the paths, now that he had found them again, now that they poured out of his memory of similar moments in similar experiences, ran to nowhere; or worse, ran into each other, became each other. Which meant that he wasn't really on any path at all; none went forward, but all ran in circles, crossing and crisscrossing one another endlessly. It was not like finding your way through the woods; it was like getting lost in the woods, and discovering that the forest was very, very big. And that you were very, very small.

He was going to ride it out; hold on to himself and let go of all resistance, no dragging of the feet. You had to do both, hold on and let go, and this time find the path; oh, hell, find just a little more of it than before? Was that asking too much? Was that impossible? But he had never felt so overwhelmed, so swept aside. Well, he probably had, but has repressed it: for sanity.

That it was all the work of... some pill, some chemical... That idea was incomprehensible, unacceptable, meant nothing. He was a human being, with human thoughts and human needs. Don't tell him that he was now the captive of some mind-changing chemical. Man was the measure of all things, was he not?

He recognized this 'thought neighborhood,' and had even given it a name: Infinite Regress. Did it help, having given it a name? Not particularly.

Then, eventually (whatever that measurement of time was supposed to mean in these circumstances), the current, the inner frenzy, let up a little, and he found that by exerting himself, by paddling real hard, he could just keep up with it.

Later he would remember the term for this measure of 'eventual time' as well... 'Coming down.'

He looked at her, the woman he has in some order of reality known for years, or, alternatively, barely knew at all except as an object for his own feelings, and said, perhaps as a joke – a wry commentary -- "Where have you been?"

She shook her head; a vigorous, characteristic gesture, the straight hair swept across her bangs.

"I don't think I could begin," she started to try -- to say what she could not begin -- hesitated, then shook her head again, and concluded, "to tell you."

Well, he thought. We're back at least to completing sentences. Uninformative, but complete.

Yet he felt cowed, and depressed. He had planned on leading the way, at least finding it himself, and on learning something about how well the two might travel together. But he had ended by doing nothing but holding on to her hand. If tripping with your girl friend had been a test (of her? himself? the relationship?) then of all the outstanding possibilities it was really he who had not passed.

He stared around the room, not daring to look into Pam's face, not wanting his own defeat to show too plainly. The Che poster had lost its swagger, fallen back into lifelessness. The silence in the room became a presence on its own. This time he volunteered to put the record on. The Incredible Sting Band: heavy, in the philosophical sense, but he was used to that sort of heaviness. At least he thought he was.

Pam announced that she was going to make tea. They agreed, wordlessly, that this would necessitate getting up and going to the kitchen. She looked down at her hand, still pressed in his. Jonathan, seeing this, grimaced, smirked at the shared weakness. Can we risk leaving each other alone? He let go of her hand.

But after she had stood and disappeared from the couch beside him, he sat on with his own endless interior monologue and grew increasingly uneasy. What was the point of sitting here? Some unseen vacuum pulled the life out of him. As if an invisible creature had crawled inside of him, got lost, couldn't breathe, and was growing hysterical. When everything had fallen away, every illusion about life, about himself, then there needed to be something close at hand. To be something more than the self; the self was, at bottom, unreal by itself. It was a house

with no windows and too many mirrors. A house of nothingness.(Was *this* coming down?) What is any man, any person, alone? Like, what *is* the point?

He had come to this place -- in his thoughts -- it was clear enough now (and completely terrifying a mere few ticks ago on the time bomb of the mind) to be put into words: This nothingness was the wild horse he had wanted to ride, the road ahead the trackless forest he had set out to explore.He had resolved to find his own way on.By himself.By an act of will, an exertion of the ego... and then come back to guide *her* through.

It could not be done.The bare truth, faced at last, simple enough.

That understood, conceded, then what?The emptiness of Matt's apartment (of any living space: his room would be the same) appalled him.Unable to remain alone in Matt's sitting room - - as if the space were too hot or cold or smoky or poisoned with a bad smell; and not merely too *empty* -- he stood and walked slowly to the kitchen to find Pam concentrating on a tarnished silver kettle at the stove.

"I'm afraid," she said slowly, "if I let it out of my sight I'll forget all about it."She turned from the stove and gave him a grin, self-conscious and a little fierce.

She was appealing to him, asking him to be kind to her even though she was devoting her full attention to watching water boil, while he, evidently, was still out there slaying the dragons of the mind. But head-tripping Jonathan remained too caught up in the circles of the inner labyrinth, the failure of his project, to understand her appeal.

He thought only, 'Good, she's not afraid.' *So the fear is mine.*

He could not stay alone in the other room, so he had come to find her -- to save him from being alone.Now he wondered, Was that enough?Would *anybody* do? Any warm human body.

To stand in a room beside another person, whose whole being was wrapped up in waiting for water to boil? And yet he did feel marginally better being there.

His 'anybody'turned and gave him a quick, self-conscious smile, then went back to her task.

Eventually, the water did boil, and with much slow concentration on the task at hand, Pam made tea for both of them, in cups she found in a cabinet over the sink.He would try it, though he ordinarily did not drink the stuff, because anything, while tripping, was a trip.Coca-cola, for instance, he could not stomach; it tasted like ground aluminum.The tea proved to be, at first sensation, hot as fire.

“Don't get into the hotness,” she cautioned, “you'll burn yourself without knowing it.”

And then incredibly bitter. He put the cup down and lit a cigarette instead, which had merely the comfort of the familiar (tasting like the smoke of burned leaves in autumn, or of newspaper rolled up and lit by electric burner in place of matches), while she drank her tea. And looked at him. And drank again.

She wanted to talk, he saw, but had no idea about what.

At last she said, "It's one thing to have heard about it, read about it."

"What?" he asked.

"Meaninglessness." Her face struggled for composure; she did not wish to seem innocent, naive. Her expression saying 'I'm sure you know all about this.'

"But to really... feel it." When she said "feel," her hand clasped on air, gesturing, but he thought only of her hand on his, as it had been.

His own hand, reflexively, went out to hers. Then, doubting the impulse, he held it back.

She saw this and gave him a puzzled look. Then an expression of surprise. Did he not have something to say in reply to her confession?

He did not.

He saw her surprise, and nodded *yes, yes*. Unable, once more, to find the right words.

Disappointed, she wondered if he was impatient with her talk, her inexperience -- but it was true. She had never made this discovery so clearly before: There was simply no meaning, no purpose to things that you didn't put there yourself. No intrinsic meaning. She'd found the insight upsetting -- troubling -- and if that's what he'd felt during other, prior, acid trips, no wonder he was careful about where and when he tripped. But surely here they were safe, and today -- today they were together. She wanted to talk about that -- didn't that make it different this time, Jon? Jon? *Are you out there?*... But since he did not seem to have anything to say, or recognize the need to say something, she let it drop. Maybe there was nothing to say. Maybe you shouldn't treat the drug like a field trip to Modern Intellectual History: maybe that's what he wanted her to understand.

"I want to take a bath," she said.

He cocked his head, not sure he'd heard.

"Want to join me?" She laughed. The words had simply come out.

Even though they were sleeping together, the invitation struck Jonathan as somehow immodest. Does a nice girl ask someone, even her boy friend, to take a bath with her?

She giggled. "I bet we can fit." They were both on the slender side.

Jonathan shook his head, and said, "No thanks," before even thinking about it.

'There was something wrong about everything' was the thought that pushed its way into his mind. Nothing was real. And so he did not want to see her body exposed. The body was the last illusion. Somehow he wanted to get through the next few hours, the effect of the drug vitiated, out of his system -- the subversive truth-drug that stripped everything, all self-importance laid bare and revealed for the nothingness it was: the bare space behind all the scenery, however you curtained things, whatever stage you chose to occupy... He would get through it all somehow and let the memory fade and go back to the world of illusions, with its devalued comforts and pretend-certainties. But he wanted the flesh, the final comfort, to remain.

A place to reside.

To rest. To be.

He wanted to crawl back into his own body and retain the hope of that pleasure, and the security, of exploring, and knowing, and possessing hers. He did not wish to burn through this mystery in the tail-spin last lap of a self-demeaning drug experience. (Though why had he expected different?)

He would still, nothingness and meaninglessness aside – demonstrated conclusively by the acid-bath of self-laceration imposed by the drug's late-phase inquisition – retain something to live for. He had his dormitory tower and his campus meals; and his joint-explorations with Bake in the evenings. His record albums (or Bake's) and his weekends with Pam, with sex and love, whatever that final word could possibly mean. Whatever their value, however transitory, the arts of self-deception, of evasion, the transitory pleasures of existence were infinitely more valuable than the wolf-fanged, ripped up, trashed up unreality of seeing beneath the pretty surfaces and looking into the heart of things. Which, upon examination, proved to be no-things.

Self-knowledge. He no longer felt any desire to know himself, and he did not in this corrosive state of mind wish to see Pam naked.

He did not wish to see flesh as mere flesh: matter, corpuscles, molecules, the universe's complicated stage mechanics -- and not as the compelling illusion, the mystery of the semi-dark,

candle-lit, slow undressing beside the mattress on the floor. Or wherever they got down to it. The mysterious provocation of desire.

She, his somebody else, did not reply, and he wondered if his declining the invitation to bathe with her had cooled the prospect for her as well. But a few minutes later she rose and left the room. He strained for the sounds, for knowledge of her actions, her whereabouts in the silent apartment, and when she returned, wearing her blue robe, the knowledge was there. The systemic whooshing in the house now cohered in his senses as the steady rumble of running water filling the tub.

"Change your mind?" she queried, no longer flirtatious or indecisive (what a good girl might or might not do was no worry of hers), but merely practical.

A body in a bathtub, or a tea bag in a cup of hot water, or a bologna and cheese sandwich: all means of soothing or serving the flesh. It was the warm bath water that called to her now. It whooshed, it soothed.

She searched him with a look. One of his moods? Or more drug weirdness.

He did not reply, and she left the room alone -- *well, he'll know where to find me.*

Once more, a matter of moments, he found himself alone; and again, still a matter of moments, his unbearable aloneness and nothingness warred with his fear of cheapening the mystery of the flesh, or the nature of their connection – whatever it was – and seeing, or *thinking*, something that he did not wish to see or think.

Her bare materiality; the mystery revealed. The dark side of the moon.

But then, still just moments later, he could no longer bear the prospect of being alone with the corrosive whirligig of consciousness. The dull corners of the room laughed at him. What was to be gained by facing once more the shadowy truths they represented?

No, a chair could not touch a wall.

Only human 'being there' had any power to give to materiality its claim to exist.

These thoughts that mocked him, his insignificance, his fakeness, his pretensions, were nothing – ghosts. They would be gone tomorrow. Someone else would have to empower them, give them meaning.

He found the bathroom (it was still where they had left it before dropping), and not entirely sure Pam was behind the door, pushed it open.

She sat in the bath, her shoulders rounded, her knees up, her breasts pressed against her knees, her straight hair gathered and tied in a kerchief atop her head (an arrangement he has never seen before).

"Close the door, babe," she said, "it's cold."

Inside the room, door closed, things were just as he suspected. The woman, the other, his 'thou,' was plainly exposed, stripped, revealed as nothing but flesh and bone. Like himself. To turn from the challenge of seeing her plainly, he turned his eyes to the mirror on the medicine cabinet, lightly fogged by steam from the bath water.

He took a towel, unthinkingly wiped the mirror. He saw his face, the eyes shifty, unable to focus. He raised one arm slightly, put another behind his back and lifted his turtleneck over his shoulders. Pulled his undershirt off. Looking at the glass, he saw bony shoulders, a slender chest, tracings of his ribs. His flesh looked reddish, and tingled, and seemed to shimmer-- the drug not yet out of his blood – his flesh not yet fully substantial.

If he stared any more, the flesh would begin to seem unreal, ghostly, mere becoming, mere evanescence: being in its inevitable progress to non-being.

He let go of the image.

When he finished undressing, he turned to look for the woman's face and found it grinning at him, his bare stripped person, once again in a knowing way, as if all this – all that followed, if not all that proceeded – could be predicted.

"Coming in?"

She slid to the back of the tub, smiling (a child: *let's play*; a side to her he did not always admire), and held out a hand to help him balance as he stepped into the tub. He sat down, slowly, in silence, a look of sudden anguish – no longer reflected in glass -- appearing in his reddening face.

Hot.

Two bodies: bare of mystery, mere human flesh, made of tea and bologna, filled with blood and nicotine, bereft of intention, flesh touching flesh in the mere contingency of making room for two bodies in close quarters.

He sighed in the night. She has shown him the path.