

## **Bad Trip**

Mattison Pierce

The glare of the fluorescent lights in the Quik-Stop Minute Mart had him wishing he had brought sunglasses. They seemed violent and judging as he strode through the aisles of chips, candy, and beer. The tiny store was empty other than the cashier and the drunk guy in the back who was fumbling with the glass door to get a six pack. But it felt incredibly crowded. He hunched his shoulders, his eyes darting back and forth as if looking for a predator that might have been hiding behind the display of two-pack muffins.

A sense of urgency overtook him, and he realized that he couldn't stay in the store any longer. He walked up to the register, piling whatever hodgepodge collection he had grabbed onto the speckled countertop. He nodded when the cashier asked if he wanted a bag, slid his card when the machine asked, and left the store after telling the cashier to keep the receipt.

He began his journey home from the corner store, plastic bag adding white noise to his steps as it bounced against his leg. Sirens sounding in the distance made him shift his eyes to and fro, but he tried to ignore them as best he could, focusing on his feet. He didn't like looking up while he walked since coming to the city. The buildings were too tall and looked as though they bowed over him, forming a canopy of metal beams and glass. He longed for green and for the gentle movement of leaves.

Anxiety spotted his brain with tiny drops of acid, leaving pockmarks in his mind. When he tried to complete a thought, it sizzled away under the burning rain. An attack was leaking through. Beginning to panic, he walked faster, periodically stretching his jaw to keep from grinding his teeth. He had to calm down, or he wouldn't make it home before his composure completely dissolved. He raised his head to look at the sunset.

The sky was bleeding. Overexposed bands of orange and yellow smeared together and slid down through the air and into his eyes like rivulets of molten wax, and it felt like he was melting along with them. He tapped at his chest in a steady rhythm to get himself to focus on something, reaching back to his earliest coping mechanisms. His lungs ached, preparing themselves to hyperventilate. Passing people on the street, his brain screamed out for them to save him, but his body kept walking, knowing that these strangers could do nothing to stop what was about to happen.

Then the sun went out. Everything that was extremely bright one moment was dark the next, as if someone had put a dimmer switch on the sun and turned it all the way down. Everything became grainy, and he felt like he needed to turn the antennae of the world to get a better picture. His consciousness was shrinking. His awareness was being confined to himself alone, and the entire city was being put behind sheets of glass. He waited for his body to seize up in panic at not knowing what was going on, but it couldn't. Panic was now a foreign feeling, a dying star being held at arm's length.

*Ah, that's right*, he thought. The meds he'd taken at home must have been kicking in. There was a blanket being pulled further over his consciousness by the moment, and he felt a heavy sense of calm being forced on him.

As he teetered on the edge of the drug's effects, it vaguely occurred to him that this feeling was a bit too large to control. Its presence was opaque, and the depth of it made him uneasy. But with the sun bearing down on him and the feeling of his thoughts burning in his brain, he thought being consumed might be better. So, with that thought, he let himself be enveloped by the void, and he watched the color that was previously unbearable to him drain from his surroundings. They pooled onto the ground and sank into the pavement, leaving the surrounding cityscape flat and bland. He was right. This was better.

His pace slowed, and he looked at his feet, suddenly aware of every step he took. The sidewalk felt harder than usual, and he felt a twinge in his left knee that was becoming more familiar lately. Sounds ran through him like liquid, and he forgot them as quickly as they were made. Cars rushing past on the left. A truck without a muffler. Two cats in an alley, intent on making babies. He continued slowly on, suddenly unable to place what it was that had frightened him so much only moments before. He cast the thought from his mind, thinking that at least now he could get home without incident.

He turned a corner, and a man burst out of one of the townhouses in front of him, yelling something impossibly loud yet perfectly incomprehensible as he stomped down the steps and onto the sidewalk, whirling around to shout toward the building. The woman with whom he was arguing came out and stood on the stoop, imperious and unyielding, and shouting just as loudly at the man in a shrill timbre. He halted and stared at the

couple, thinking that being a spectator was better than walking between them. Wondering what they were arguing about, he strained his ears but still failed to understand the guttural noises that spewed from their frothing mouths. The language seemed familiar. Were they speaking English? German? Or was it some other twist of linguistics unique to only these two?

As these questions slid through him one after another without pausing to be answered, the woman stopped yelling and went back into the house, slamming the door behind her and allowing the drone of the city once again to settle in like dust over the closing day.

The man on the sidewalk was looking in his direction with an expression too intense for what he felt he deserved. The stranger's lips moved, forming shapes that he assumed were vowels, and he watched the man's tongue move behind his teeth with loose fascination. The sounds eventually wormed their way inside his ears, and he was surprised at how they managed to sound so angry despite how sluggish they seemed.

"What are you looking at?" they said, the words funneling slowly through his ears and sloshing against his brain.

He wasn't sure why he was being asked this question, but it looked like the man was ready to fight with him. He tried to think of an answer that could appease the stranger blocking his path. Yet, the more he thought about it, the less sense the things around him made. He felt as though he was playing out a memory in his head, the tension of the situation having passed and that there was no rush to get to the end. He felt content to let the confrontation play out on its own. Only this wasn't a memory, and he was no longer a spectator. Why had he not answered the other man? Had he forgotten how to speak? As if to test this, he posed the question to himself.

"What am I looking at?" he said more than asked, the phrase dribbling from his mouth and onto the pavement. It splashed on the sidewalk and evaporated in an instant, vanishing from his mind. What had he just said? He became aware that he hadn't blinked for a long time. Did he look strange to this man in front of him? He looked up and blinked at the stranger, slowly, consciously, and he could feel his eyelids coating his corneas with a fresh layer of mucus.

The man shouldered past him, knocking him off balance even though there was plenty of room on the sidewalk. Watching the stranger disappear

into what now seemed like a monochromatic backdrop of a movie set, he felt somewhat sorry he wasn't able to provide the man with an answer. He blinked again, making up his mind to do so more often, and continued on his way home.

He did not live far away. The location of his apartment was the reason he chose to walk down to the minute mart instead of go grocery shopping. Bringing food home meant having to prepare it, and he wasn't ready for that kind of commitment. His apartment building loomed in the distance only a block ahead, but it appeared much farther away than it should have. The sidewalk seemed to extend under his feet, making him walk for such a long time that he was surprised when he made it to the building's doors.

None of his neighbors acknowledged him when they passed him in the hallway. Or maybe they did, but he did not acknowledge them, just barely aware of their presence as he made his way to his own numbered doorway. Their shapes seemed to glide past him like glitches in a game. When he got to his apartment, he retreated immediately to his room. Sitting on the floor, he let the plastic bag settle beside him, and he breathed in the stale air, taking in his surroundings. Everything here smelled like himself, and he smiled lightly at the familiarity. He pushed his consciousness out before him, the tendrils of his thoughts stretching until they filled the room. Finally, he was home. He leaned his head back against the wall and forgot for the next two hours.

These meds weren't suited for him after all, he thought when he woke from his stupor. What should have been a fifteen-minute walk had felt like hours, his only solace being that he didn't have a breakdown in the middle of the street. That would have been a good thing if he had been able to work through the problem himself, but the meds took over for him, forcing his feelings into compliance. He wasn't looking to be put into a box, safely tucked away from the world. What he wanted was to be balanced and functioning, able to speak and connect with things around him.

He would have to go back to his psychiatrist and redo the process of deciding what went wrong, if it was a dosage problem, if he was allergic to this family of medication, and what other side effects he could expect from the new prescription. Would they suggest toughing this one out for a while to see if he adjusted? He looked at the lingering graininess of his room and decided that would be the worst option.

His therapist kept saying he was only a few steps away from his own success story. But how many of those steps were new medications? He sighed, feeling like he was falling back to square one. Fiddling in the plastic bag, he pulled out a pack of sour gummy worms and tore it open, the candy's unnaturally bright colors contrasting against the gray of his bedroom. He popped one of the elastic crawlers into his mouth and crunched on the outer layer of sugar before really starting to chew. His teeth throbbed. He was too old to be eating candy like this, but the artificial sweetness flooded his mouth with artificial happiness.

He put another gummy in his mouth. As he chewed, he looked down to find the imprints of color on his fingertips. Thinking it might be residue from the candy, he ran his hands over the rug on which he was sitting, and the parts that he touched became smeared with their rightful hues. The corners of his eyes creased with a tired smile, and he began to touch his hands and arms, leaving streaks of color where there had been none. He spent the rest of the evening treating himself gently, eating candy and brushing his fingers against the surfaces in his apartment. And though it was splotchy and uneven, color began to flow back into his life.