



PROLOGUE

THE BEGINNING

COLD SWEAT DRENCHES MY BODY, soaking my clothes. I am lying on a single bed in my friends' guestroom. The midday June sun pours through the south-facing windows. But, despite the open windows, the air barely moves, and the heat is stifling. Am I reacting to the heat or to the drug? I'm under the influence of a novel compound related to psilocybin. It appears safe in animals, but no more than a dozen people have taken it. Preliminary reports are that it is an effective psychotherapeutic aid.

Arturo sits on the edge of the bed and gently wipes my forehead, cheeks, and neck with a cool wet washcloth. I shiver. He briefly rests his open hand, palm down, on my chest and breathes in a slow, deep, and loud manner, hoping I will imitate him. Doing so may help me relax. I have used the same method when I am with someone who is having difficulty during a psychedelic experience.

Nevertheless, my chills concern him. He reaches for the light blanket at the foot of the bed, unfolds it, and covers my chest.

"Am I sick?" I barely whisper.

"You're doing fine," he murmurs, but his sharp eyes keep watch. If it looks as if I am going to vomit, he will quickly turn my head to prevent aspiration, which could lead to a life-threatening pneumonia.

Eyes closed, dimly aware of my friend's comforting presence, my mind's eye gazes at the unfolding vision.

From a distance of several dozen yards, I see my father's father Selig standing in a small circle of friends—all men, all in their early

twenties. Fifty years before my birth, I see myself—about six years old—peering out from under his coat, standing pressed against my forbear’s lower body. The perspective changes, and now I am in the mind of the little boy. I see and feel my grandfather’s thick woolen outer garment protecting me from the cold blasts of autumn wind. The smell of cigars permeates his clothes and makes even more familiar the comfort of my cocoon. I adjust myself in this new space, and Selig accommodates my movements, shifting his legs to provide me more room. The movement causes the coat to open slightly, and it loses some warmth. I pull its edges closer together, just below my eyes. My steamy breath, which the coat captures, helps keep the chill off my face.

I look out toward the great square of Lvov* looming above us. Black shadows spread from the massive stone buildings visible in all directions—government, finance, high-end retail. Pale cobblestone extends to the horizon. Beneath my feet is a darker paving stone.

The four men stand in a close bunch to ward off the penetrating gusts punctuating the sunny day. Handsome and healthy, they are either clean-shaven or sport only small tidy mustaches. None wears the sidelocks characteristic of their Hasidic† brethren, whom they see as unenlightened, living in the past.

I feel safe within the confines of my grandfather’s coat; however, the anxiety in the men’s voices presses against me. I don’t understand the language, but they are communicating dread, a sense of growing threat. I hear the word *pogrom*‡ and Selig’s friends’ eyes widen. I shiver and bring the coat edges even closer. Selig once more adjusts to my movements.

*Also, Lviv, Lemberg, Lwów. The largest city in Ukraine, founded in the early first millennium. Various powers have controlled it throughout history: Russia (the Russian Empire, as well as the USSR), Poland, Germany, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

†A stream of Judaism that began in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe. Their emphasis on direct spiritual experience over scholastic learning—in essence, a spiritual revival—produced a rift within European Judaism. Their traditional dress and hair caused them to stand out and prompted contemporary secular Jews to shun them.

‡A Russian word meaning a popular uprising against a community’s Jewish members. Civic and religious authorities provoked, condoned, or ignored these deadly outbursts.

The friends share their fear, helplessness, and uncertainty. I telepathically understand what they are asking each other.

“What will we do?”

They direct their question in Selig’s direction and lower their gaze toward me.

“Where will we go?”*

The weight of the drug-induced vision flattens my prone body. Panic stirs as I begin sinking into the bed. I jerk upright before I descend much further, startling Arturo.

My guide quickly regains his composure. “Are you all right?” he asks quietly. He is aware of my regressed vulnerable state and is on high alert. You never know what people are going through, he thinks. Or what they might do.

Sitting with my legs extended in front of me, I hang my head low, neck at almost a right angle to my spine. I am drooling and shake my head from side to side, then laugh. Sour sweat trickles from my underarms and down my sides.

“Wow,” I muster. “This is intense.”

“You’re doing fine,” Arturo murmurs soothingly. While his day job is an economist at a major bank, he’s been learning and practicing psychedelic psychotherapy for several decades. He has been around, and I trust him. There are medical professionals in the group today, too, which reassures both of us.

“Here. Have some water.”

For a moment, the intense cold hurts my mouth. I swirl the liquid around and noisily spit it back into the glass without swallowing any.

I stare at the incandescent water, puzzled and uncertain.

“Lay down again, okay? I am here for you.” Not waiting for my

*My grandfather left Ukraine around 1908. In a 1918 pogrom in Lvov, local Ukrainians and Polish troops killed about one hundred Jews over several days. During World War II, over 100,000 Jews died in the Lvov ghetto and in the camps to which Nazis sent them. The worst violence occurred in 1941, when Nazi-led Ukrainian forces killed about six thousand Jews over two months.

response, he places one hand on my chest and another against my mid-back and guides me slowly back down.

Ten years before my birth, I lift my eyes, dully pondering a sky as deep blue as on that day in Lvov. It must be autumn here, too, I realize. A powerful wind likewise reminds me of the afternoon with my grandfather and his friends. Gusts blow the chimneys' smoke away from the vast mud-filled plaza where I stand. I lower my gaze to the horizon beyond the camp. The panorama—infinite fields and forest—is terrifying. No matter how close, it is impossible to reach. Now or ever.

I sense my nearly frozen feet in shoes buried in mud. I blink and tremble as a shockwave of wind assaults me through my threadbare striped pajamas. I almost lose my balance. A twenty-foot-high fence stands about thirty yards away. Squinting against the sun, I narrow my view and observe similarly shivering men all around. Rhythmically shifting their weight from one foot to the other, they stir the mud. Others lean against wooden barracks, watching. Weak, cold, and numb, a unique horror seeps into me—a dread filling my body, mind, and soul.

I bolt up again, looking around the little room. Pulsating air shimmers malignantly like an evil insect's slowly beating wings.

"Where's the barf basin?" I eke out.

Arturo deftly grabs a bright red plastic one-gallon bucket sitting on the floor nearby.

"Here," he says and sets it between my legs on the bed. I retch but nothing comes up.

"Lay back down, brother. Whatever it is, it's big and you need to go through it."

Tears pour down my cheeks. "How could this be happening?" I sob.

"Don't worry," he says. "It is happening." He adds, "And it'll be fine."

I lie back down on my own this time.

Immediately, I return to the camp. "Oh, God, what is this?" I moan. I am exhausted. My will has given out. I no longer desire existence

nor experience, but my flesh is stubborn, in the habit of life, and holds on.

I see a mound of naked and emaciated bodies on the other side of the fence. Most, but not all, have stopped moving. The next moment, I am near the bottom of the pile, and see only blackness. My neck bent painfully, I taste something salty and thick, and retch. I am afraid to swallow, and my nostrils are clogged. Then nothing.

I become nothing. Now, I am nothing. Before, I had existed, but not as the actual Rick Strassman. There is no actual Rick Strassman. Neither I nor anyone else could identify me because I have not yet come into existence, I have never existed. But how do I know this since I am nonexistent? How can I compare myself to existence and realize my nonexistence? I have nothing to compare to anything else. I do not know that I am nothing, that I am identical with nothing. No difference exists between me and nothing. But I am also everywhere. Since



I do not exist, I am nowhere. But nowhere is everywhere because both are infinite, and one necessitates the existence of the other. Nowhere encompasses everywhere, everywhere is where I am not. I am potential and thus exist everywhere. At least for now, though, here I am, unaware of my nonexistence.

I am in a closet full of white light and face a closed door in front of me. White light all around. I want to merge with it, to become it. First, though, I realize the light must incinerate me and I yield to the fire. Reduced to weightless, silvery-gray ash, I stop identifying even with the all-consuming fire-light. For the next two hours, I skim along the border between emptiness and the light.

My reverie ends suddenly when something strong and hard clamps around the sides of my skull.

Twenty-seven-year-old Charlotte Strassman, hallucinating after an injection of scopolamine,* marvels at the sight. A dreamy blissful smile on her face, pupils replacing her irises, she wonders aloud, "Why are there radios floating through the air?" She grabs at one and her hand passes through it. She laughs. The masked and gowned obstetrician picks up the forceps from an adjacent tray. His gloved hands slide them into my mother's vagina. Soon thereafter, at 4:04 AM, I take my first breath, my head flattened on both sides.



Reflections

PAST LIVES

In my early thirties, I began taking part in a psychedelic research group consisting of physicians, psychologists, and other white-collar professionals. There were two purposes motivating us. One was to characterize the effects of new compounds. Underground chemists sent us

*A drug obstetricians commonly used in former times to put women in labor into a "twilight" state of forgetful amnesia. "Scoping" prevented laying down any memories of a painful childbirth. It is the same compound responsible for many of the effects of jimsonweed, also called datura or locoweed. Those under its influence may be completely unaware that the reality with which they are interacting is entirely hallucinatory.

samples of these drugs to “bioassay” them; that is, take the substance and carefully note its effects. We then sent its inventor our reports. This information helped the chemist relate the drugs’ pharmacology in animals with its psychological effects in humans. This is the field of “structure-activity relationships.”

Did the new drug produce an effect that was, for example, more or less visual than the parent compound? Was it primarily emotional or intellectual? How long did it last? What were the side effects? Thus, our project contributed to understanding the pharmacology of consciousness, would inform development of newer drugs, and might even discover a unique psychotherapeutic tool.

The other function of our group was to work more in depth with better-known substances—such as MDMA and LSD—psychologically, spiritually, and interpersonally. We believed our character and training qualified us to uniquely understand, communicate, and apply information from the psychedelic state. This often took the form of extensive emotional sharing and self-disclosure in an atmosphere of utmost trust.

I entered two people’s lives during my drug experience that day. One was a six-year-old boy in Ukraine in the first decade of the twentieth century. Another was an adult in a European concentration camp in the 1940s. How did this happen? In the absence of confirming the objective reality of these experiences, we are left to speculate.

We could interpret the visions’ contents psychologically, as if they were dreams, even though they felt much more real. In contrast to usual dreams, the contents of the visions demonstrated a greater coherence and temporal continuity. In addition, I maintained a more stable sense of self. I was not confused; rather, I clearly perceived and interacted with the visions fully aware, observing and remembering the unfolding events with great accuracy. In this way, psychedelic experiences share features with lucid dreaming.¹

But why this particular vision and not another? As always, it comes down to set and setting.

Perhaps the subtle undercurrent of anti-Jewish sentiment I felt in the group that day triggered an association to my emigrant grandfather. Even after decades living in the United States, he still looked like an Orthodox Jew from the “old country.” The psychedelic drug intensified feelings I was already dimly aware of and was trying to minimize. It also heightened my mind’s ability to create emotionally meaningful linkages and images using psychic material already at my disposal—my knowledge of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust.

We may also interpret the visions using contemporary neuroscientific models. Functional brain imaging demonstrates that psychedelics loosen connections within brain circuits mediating our sense of self. This allows input from other circuits that the “self” normally keeps suppressed. Forgotten memories emerge, repressed feelings become conscious, stress and conflict take visual form, and new relationships appear between past memories and the present.

Are there “nonscientific” and “nonpsychological” explanations for the visions? That is, could I have truly been conscious of long-deceased individuals’ experiences?

Reincarnation and past lives figure prominently in Eastern religions. My Zen teachers took this as an article of faith, a fundamental principle of the tradition. However, we did not discuss mechanisms of action of reincarnation; that is, how it worked. Instead, the importance of past lives related to how they influenced our present one.

While the Hebrew Bible lacks explicit mention of past lives or reincarnation, later developments in Kabbalah incorporated these ideas into their theories and practices. This may be the result of the diffusion and accretion of other religions and cultures into more traditional Judaism.

Without requiring belief in the existence of transmigrating souls, the metaphysics of Maimonides—medieval Judaism’s greatest philosopher and theologian—provides an explanation for past life visions. His system was built on Aristotle’s theory of the Active Intellect—an invisible repository of information surrounding the Earth. In contemporary

terms, it is a field of information. The “sublunar sphere” is the location of the Active Intellect, a sphere whose center is the Earth, while the moon’s circuit defines its outer surface.

The Active Intellect’s content is incomprehensibly vast: everything that has ever happened, is now happening, and may happen in the future, at every possible scale. The medievalists believed one could attain a certain proximity to the Active Intellect and thus access its contents. One’s time and place, heredity, psychology, and experience combined to determine the unique specific information one apprehended.

Aristotle defined two mental faculties constituting the mind. The Intellect or “rational faculty” was the location of concepts, ideas, and notions. Everything else resided in the Imagination or “imaginative faculty”—emotions, bodily sensation, perception, and the sense of reality. One became aware of the Active Intellect’s information through the function of the Imagination, which garbed this material in visions. Then, one’s Intellect extracted information from these “imaginative” experiences—converting them to verbal thoughts, concepts, and notions.

In my case, we could propose that the psychedelic drug acted to stimulate my Imagination and allowed greater access to the contents of the Active Intellect. In that day’s particular setting, my set steered me toward seeing and feeling the experiences of people from an earlier generation. These were individuals with whom I shared a close affinity—historical, emotional, spiritual, and biological. I then recognized and understood what I was seeing using my cognitive and intellectual functions.

This episode reinforces the value of “letting go” in difficult psychedelic moments. I had learned this from previous drug experiences, primarily by relaxing areas of bodily tension. In the years between college and joining the research group, regular meditation practice strengthened my ability to let go, to remain relaxed and attentive despite painful or frightening experiences.

Suffocating and drowning in human excrement at the bottom of a pile of concentration camp prisoners—either dead or in death's throes—sinking into seething mud, what could I do? I let go. Then I lost any individuality, my sense of self, a differentiation between me and anything else.

These memories, whether resulting from our Imagination conflating with the Active Intellect or increased functional connectivity in the brain, are sometimes eerily accurate. For example, a drug-induced vision of an episode of chocolate cookie-induced anaphylaxis when I was a toddler turned out to be true.

However, psychedelic memories do not always correspond to real events. My birth certificate does not mention forceps delivery, and it lists Seconal, a barbiturate sedative, not scopolamine, as the anesthetic. Either I projected these memories onto what happened or else the records are inaccurate. My guess is that the former is the case. Unconsciously, I may have felt the need to make my birth experience more traumatic than it was to support a self-image consistent with where I found myself that day in my friends' guestroom.

Finally, this account highlights the importance of the psychedelic "sitter" who supervises drug sessions. A good sitter assists in maximizing benefit and minimizing harm. The term refers to two closely related functions. One is to take the role of a babysitter, dealing with the comfort and safety of one's charge. "Sitting" also relates to the person's state of mind while managing others' intense experiences—a light meditative state, the result of "sitting meditation." It is an alert and receptive mind that simply pays attention to ongoing experience.* A good sitter lets someone "have their own trip," going through whatever they need to. At the same time, he or she can respond at once if the situation calls for it.

Arturo had taken and administered many and diverse psychedelic

*This is similar to what Freud called "evenly suspended attention," which skilled analysts bring to bear in listening to their patients.

substances, so he knew, in a general sense, what I was going through. He was attentive yet nonintrusive, helpful when necessary. He encouraged me to accept the experience, not push it away; to move forward and through it, not get stuck in fear. He shared his belief that the best outcome came from letting go. This provided hope when all seemed lost.

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