

Brad Watson

Little Awakenings

We were drifting through one of our long separations. This was after most of the worst stuff, though, the head in the oven and the space heater, the slap fights out in the front yard late at night, the ramming of the car through the screen porch. Now that she was weakened, her pious mother had slipped her a little Jesus mickey, and I had to listen to that when I visited our little boy, blah blah The Lord This blah, God That blah blah. It was worse than anything that had happened before.

Some friends of mine were living in a trailer park out in the country, just a fenced-off area on the edge of a pasture, a corral for mobile homes. All the trailers there were small and made, as far as I could tell, during the 1950s, the time when all those post-war people decided to hit the road, and these were trailers that seemed made for the road. They were two-toned and streamlined, rounded or angled to slip the wind. These mobile homes had hitches and little sets of wheels suspended inside the concrete block pilings that held them up. Somehow, and sadly, a dozen or so of those post-war wanderers had ended up in this pasture, lives had dried and faded like old newspapers in the sun, and now all the trailers were for rent.

I still had the VW bus we'd bought in California, our own miniature version of the mobile home dream, and I had the back seats in it. My younger brother Ray and I were going to pick up the guys at the trailer, get stoned, and go to a drive-in movie with a case of beer. We left our mother's house, where I was rooming again during the break-up, stopped for the beer and ice at the Jitney Junior, and drove out to the trailer park corral.

Arnold, the angel, let us in. He had such a cloud of diaphanous light brown hair you could hardly see his face. It gave him a beatific presence. He took careful, deliberate steps in his heavy, unlaced workboots. He had a paper cup in his hand. Lester and Sammy, rimmed with the weak light from the table lamp, sat on the dirt-brown sofa. They held little paper cups, too.

"Mushroom tea," Arnold said. He poured us two little cupfuls. The cups were Dixie cups, the little disposable ones you pluck from dispensers in bathrooms. I think they were there when Arnold moved in, and I wondered about the kind of people who would live in a trailer with an actual trailer hitch on it and drink their drinks from these little Dixie cups. As if at any minute, any minute now, they might have to hitch up and move again. But they never did. The mushroom tea was thin and tasteless.

"I ate some of these with Zach," I said. "Nothing much happened."

"The tea is better," Ray said. My brother continued to surprise me with his experience in the drug-taking business. He had just turned fifteen and looked like a pretty girl, his wavy hair parted in the middle and reaching halfway down his back, his dark brown eyes big and soft as a calf's. I shouldn't have brought you along, I thought.

We took our Dixie cups and settled in the trailer's living room, which was small but comfortable. The room I'd been sharing with Ray in our mother's home was smaller. Once again, time and lives were on the old hamster wheel, nobody going anywhere. Everyone wanted things to get better but everyone was confused and exhausted. My wife and little boy were living with *her* parents, so there we were. No one should be allowed to marry so young. I couldn't think about any of it. I was running my father's dingy bar, the Crazyhorse, no windows, the stench of piss and spilled beer. Day-in, day-out, all night, pushing beer over the counter and playing a little pool. I had developed an impressive bank shot. I rarely saw the sunshine. I'd say I wasn't living for the future. Part of that was being only nineteen years old, still only nineteen years. But we had a baby! I don't know what I was thinking. Nothing, like I said.

We sat in the trailer and drank the tea. It began to develop a taste, like soil and rubber bathtub toys. Nothing was happening, so Ray and I got up and poured ourselves another cupful. Lester said he'd been out into the pasture behind the trailer park that afternoon and had just happened to see the mushrooms growing there. I asked him how he could tell they weren't the poisonous kind, and he said it was easy. Sammy said you didn't usually find the poisonous kind in the same sorts of places anyway, and yawned, and two little brown paisleys

fluttered from the back of his throat like cupboard moths. I looked around and saw that the paisleys covered the walls of the trailer living room, and the air was full of them. We breathed them in and out. They were hairy, like anchovies, and they began to loosen up phlegm in my chest. I coughed and shot something onto the carpet.

"Oh, wow," said Lester from his scrawny face. He had no eyes.

"We'd better go on to the movie, if we're going," Arnold said, very dreamy. I couldn't see his face at all, in the little cloud of hair on his head.

"Man," I said, "I can't see your face."

"My mother, man, she oh-dee'd on Valium one time," he said.

"Looked in the mirror and had no face at all. She freaked out. The old man took her to the hospital."

"Wow."

We went out and I opened the sliding side door to the VW bus and they all bumbled past me trying to get in. The case of beer was in there, sweating, the ice bag melting beside it. I cranked up and got us onto the road, an old two-lane country highway. I made sure to put my whole mind to the driving, because the road was so narrow and the night was so dark. The headlamps lit up a tiny circle the size of a stage spotlight in front of the van. I forced myself to check the speedometer. We were doing ten. I sort of woke up then, in my position hugging the wheel, and saw that my brother in the front passenger seat was leaning very close to the windshield, his eyes wide with silent cartoon terror. Just over our shoulders, Arnold and Lester and Sammy were out of their seats, holding onto the backs of ours, leaning toward the windshield with similar expressions. I started to laugh. Slowly like people very frightened they turned their heads on stiff necks to stare at me, their eyes round as bush babies', and then they began laughing, too. I stopped the bus in the middle of the road.

"Christ," I said. "We can't go to a movie!"

I managed to turn the bus around without getting stuck in the ditch, and we idled it back to the trailer park and went back inside, where we sat in the living room and sort of lost track of one another. It was like looking out at the world through the pinhole in a box camera,

and speaking every now and then to others who were inside a room you could see into through your pinhole.

Dickey came in, all miniaturized and with an aura. He lived in an even smaller trailer across the little dirt drive path that wound through the park. He was just seventeen himself, and he had a well-known problem. His problem was his wife, who was only twelve or thirteen, maybe fourteen or sixteen, I forget, but she was awfully young, and not pretty, with tiny stupid eyes, a long nose, and long lifeless blonde hair. But she was crazy. Crazy for sex, crazy for wildness. Dickey couldn't keep up with her, much as he tried. No one could have. Maybe a whole pack of boys. But no one man. Dickey, who had run off and joined the Navy by somehow lying about his age, had fetched this girl away with him out of their small town in Michigan, and now they were stationed here in Mississippi at a naval air training station some 200 miles from water. Same middle of nowhere, only hotter. The first time Dickey shipped out on a carrier, his wife disappeared. He had to go find her when he got back. She was living with some spades down in Laurel and didn't even know where she was, had cut off her long blonde hair.

Now Dickey knocked on the door, and he may have been knocking for a while, we didn't notice, so he finally opened the door and came on in, which we noticed and were surprised by, but no one spoke. This didn't matter because Dickey paid us no mind and went straight to the sofa. He sat down between Lester and Sammy, buried his face in his hands and began to sob.

"She's gone," he said. "She's really gone, this time. I can't find her. She's taken off, I don't know who with this time. I don't know where she is. God, what a life!" He moaned and sobbed and rocked on the couch. After a couple of minutes of this, when he'd pretty much gotten the biggest emotion out, he looked up from his hands, blinking and wiping away huge tears. We stared at him as if he were dying before our eyes. I was terrified.

"What's the matter with you guys?" he said.

"We're tripping on mushrooms," Arnold said.

About that time I noticed my little brother was missing. I wandered back through the trailer looking for him. The hallway was only about

ten feet long but I was moving down a long corridor with dozens of rooms standing to either side. I think this was because the scene kept recycling itself in my head, resetting itself and running again. Who knows how long I stood in that hallway, inching along? At the long-away end of it my brother lay on a blue waterbed mattress under a very bright bare bulb, staring at the bulb with unblinking eyes.

"Ray!" I shouted. I heard stumbling and moaning, and after a long time the others bumped into me crowding into the room. It was like the moment on the road in the bus all over again, but it wasn't funny.

I pointed to my brother. I was crying.

"Oh, my God," I said, "what's wrong?"

"Oh, man," someone said, "is he dead?"

"Check him."

My brother's eyes, brown and cowlike but still unblinking, moved to look at us.

Someone laughed, maybe Dickey.

"He's not dead!" someone else shouted.

I fell onto the bed and held him. "Ray!" I said. "Get up, come outside."

We all slipped through the fence and walked into the field. The long grass was moist with dew. I sat Ray down and wandered off by myself. The sky was perfectly clear and stars shone brilliant and distinct against black space. You could see right out into space, there was no protective barrier. I was moaning, Oh, this is no good, this is no fun.

Dickey took over then. It must have been that Navy training. He herded us all back into the trailer, which was a feat because we'd all scattered into the pasture, each in his own world. Arnold had climbed a little tree. Lester stood at the edge of the cow pond, as if he wanted to swim but first had to invent the concept. Dickey came from a grove of pines, pulling Sammy by the arm. He got us all back inside and made some coffee.

"Where's Ray?" I shouted.

"Sit down, shut up!" Dickey said. He went outside. We crowded to the window. Dickey walked back into the field to where we'd sat Ray down a little earlier, stood him up and walked him back toward the

trailer. We sat back down. The door opened and Dickey came in with Ray and sat him down on the sofa. I forgot where he'd been, and then I remembered.

After we'd drunk the coffee, Dickey put us all in my bus and drove us around for a while. At first he drove very fast, about a hundred miles an hour, and never turned, like the whole town was in a straight line and he was racing through it, I was pressed back in my seat with the force of acceleration, until we began shouting, Slow Down! Stop! and he eased off some, and after some time the blurred lights flashing past began to come into focus, and street signs and intersections and houses and yards and cars in driveways, a world transforming. We finally came down way on the other side of town, about two in the morning, in the vast, mown, dew-laced emptiness of a golf course. I felt as if my whole body had just come unclenched from a long, long, sustained electric shock.

"Oh, man, that was something," Arnold said. "You got to watch that shit, man."

"Poison," Lester said. They laughed.

"It was awful," I said.

"Well, it's my turn now," Dickey said. "I'm getting fucked up now," he said, "and you guys can take care of me."

Not long after that I had a religious experience. I woke up in the night feeling lower than ever, and decided maybe the wife was right. God, I said, whatever you want to me to do. Whatever. Please help me. That's how low I was. And right then I felt this wave of emotion roll over me and out into the air, it all poured out. I wept. And then, as washed out as if I'd taken a giant hit of Valium, I got some sleep. The next day I drove over to my in-laws' house and told my wife about it. She was skeptical, but gave me a chance. We went out on a few dates. We parked and made out the way we had in high school, before we'd done anything, long wet kissing, no fucking. She said she wanted to do it right this time. I had long talks with their minister, started going to their church. We got back together. I was a family man again. But it couldn't last. I couldn't ever get back that feeling I'd had in my room the night I was saved. There was nothing in the church like that. It was a Southern Baptist church, and so of course pretty soon everyone began to look very

comical, in their polyester suits and dresses, their little leather Bibles in their clean hands, their little wedge-shaped purses, the little rolls of fat around the ankles of the ladies, the clean-shaven double chins of the men with their iron handshakes, swaggering Old Spice good cheer. Heaven was exactly like Earth, and they held the deed. I began to feel very strange, as if I were a secret amnesiac pretending to remember who these people were, where I belonged, what it was I was supposed to be doing. I felt very sick at heart.

Of course this erosion took place over some length of time. I'd started at the junior college, worked a local woodshop job, then we'd moved away to the university, joined a Baptist church up there. But all this time the ground beneath my feet was being eaten away. I was getting edgy, morose. I wanted to drink. My wife finally complained and said, "Don't you love me at all?"

"Wait, now," I said, "don't ask me that. It's not a good time."