My Father Takes A Trip
by M Rossman

Dose: T+ 0:00 1 tablet oral LSD

Body weight: 0 lbs

One day my father told me it was time, and some months later when we both were ready I took
him off to a small cabin in the mountains, to escort him on his first acid trip. For years I had
thought about introducing him to LSD later, in preparation for his dying. But Harold came to it
sooner in his own growth, without my urging, which made me doubly glad to share the occasion.

I was more his escort and witness than an active guide. During his trip, I mostly managed the
music and gave him the reassurance of my presence by infrequent responses, staying out of the
way. A few times I was more directive, pointing him toward a deeper level when he got stuck in
pre-pubescent memories on the way up, and suggesting strongly that he had choice about how to
reintegrate what he had learned, while coming down. But basically, it was his trip: he had set its
contours up and prepared himself, and I just watched it happen. The most active useful thing I
did was take notes, which helped him later to connect with his experience.

The day before he tripped we had a lazy lunch together, and then relaxed for hours as I drove him
up to the Sierra to find a place of peace. Night was falling as we got to the cabin; I made a fire,
and helped him to prepare his space. Over dinner, we reminisced about the many years he had
watched his children at their psychedelic rituals, and how he had come to his own. I teased him a
bit about having had to attend a seminar with Stanislav Grof, the noted researcher, to finally give
himself permission. He said the seminar had clarified things for him, as it had; and we turned in
early.

In the morning I fed him a good breakfast, laced with extra C and E vitamins to buffer his body
against its coming stress; and watched him check out the eyeshade he had chosen, the headphones,
and the music he had programmed. To find good acid, in those days of scant supply and shoddy
synthesis, had taken me months, for I wanted the best for him. I talked of the search and of the
lore of its use again as he held the small blue tab in his palm, and probed him again for uncertainty
and fear. But he was clear, and we said the ancient toast together: ‘L’chaim!’

After he swallowed it, I got the axe, and took him out for a walk to gather wood – to give his
body motion to rest on, and to complete his ritual of preparation. We carted the manzanita
faggots back, stacked them inside, and said goodbye to the morning. By then the first tremors of
strangeness were rising in his blood, and we laid him down with his eyeshade on, wired him up to
sound, and got on with it.

Though I had brought him to a place of good vibes where he himself had spent a night of magic
once before, I almost blew it at the start: for between our walk in the cold and the mattress we
lugged inside, dense still with winter night, his body took a chill that blankets and the roaring fire
beyond did not dispel. It took me an hour to recognize how truly cold he was, insulate him on
sleeping-bags, and turn him on his side open to the fire to thaw, kicking myself for my negligence.
Fighting the clenching of his muscles against the cold kept him down, and for much of this first hour
his awareness was mainly in his body. As he lay there blind inside his eyeshade, hearing only Bach
through his headphones, the outer world withdrew and he began the inward journey, feeling out
the marvelous discreteness of the individual muscles, exploring his nervous system. As he warmed
up, he stopped confusing the neuronic twitchings and explosions with cold-reflex, accepted my
counsel to stop fighting them, and let them take his body – which jerked and throbbed for hours,
sometimes in violent rhythmic motion.
As his body let go, he was carried deeper into the experience. The sitar’s notes in his earphones,
‘random and colorful’, took him to the five-and-dime stores of his childhood to stand before their
shelves of a myriad gaudies, and took him into the quality of experience newly minted in exquisite
detail, discovered through the eyes of the child still live within him. He wandered out eating
chocolate kisses and through other scenes of his youth, feeling his hairline change as he grew from
two to thirteen in half an hour.
‘How little is really your own,’ he said, ‘the color and texture of a particular little fragment of
bone.’ And with this, he began to experience the qualities of substance. At first it was simply
the substance of this material world. He spent a long time being eleven in Chicago, a young boy
out on the prowl, discovering – in the slag heaps and coal mounds, rusty iron and broken glass,
all the detritus of urban earth – the stuff from which his world was made. Worn rags and boards,
a sense of materials wearied by wear, become thin, greasy, dull; and a sense of wonder at how
impoverished his life among these had been, and how uncelebrated.
I took off his pants to leave him naked under the covers, stoked up the fire, urged him to go deeper.
Explosions in the cortex, the brain-stem. He began to be aware of the flesh of the universe, and saw
these qualities of matter as its qualities, perhaps from an underlying sense of the wear of his own
matter, his sixty-one year old frame. He spoke of ‘the worn, grimy, re-used material out of which
reality is constructed.’ Yet what caught him was not the small pity of it all, but his realization
that this thin worn fabric ‘has no reason to be, except someone once put it together . . . and so
much had to happen to the raw material of all this, before it could take these forms!’
But what was there in the first place? ‘There must have been something, some clarity of purpose
. . . . ’ As he wondered, he began actually to feel it as ‘a crystallographic intelligence.’ I said softly,
‘Is you speaking of her grace the Shaper?’ without lifting his earphones to let him hear me, and did
a little dance of glee unseen – at his making contact, and at all the ironies. My daddy the lifelong
atheist, my daddy the Marxist materialist, now plunging headlong through Hegel’s echo into the
true dialectic. My father, who strove for forty years to write simply and clearly of the workingman’s
bread-and-butter struggle in his union newspapers, here a journalist still, opening the mouth of
his distant body every now and then to report precisely on transcendence, on ‘states of being
and of awareness, and their interplay’ in disjointed sentences, lucid and poetic, and elegant with metaphor, so much so that later he cried out, ‘I’m not entitled to such extravagance of concept!’

As the full effects of the acid took him, his rush went on, carrying him inward towards the Light. He began to know the qualities which underlie the qualities of substance. He saw the universe as glass, crystalline and discrete, gloriously multifoliate yet unrelenting in its angular quality. This perception was shadowed by personality, for also he was reading out his sense of his own self, a constant expression of sharp edges in argument, whose monotony made him sad as he realized ‘how much of the space of a lifetime has been used on the angularity, the hardness and verifiability of things.’

He was still in touch with all the shattered metals of his childhood in Chicago – indeed, his awareness was working on all these levels simultaneously, so that their metaphors reflected and penetrated each other, making something whole of all the planes of reality, as it is.

Then he became aware of something new to him – a dynamic within the crystalline, a soft and flowing quality – and discovered that he was this too. ‘There’s all this space between molecules!’ ‘Right!’ I yelled. ‘And something in it!’ ‘Right!!’ ‘Something strung like embroidery, gathered in accumulations of meaning . . .’ He savored the polar qualities, invented his own names for them, repeated the names in incantation: ‘the angularity of crystal, the sinuousness of vapor;’ and then realized, ‘There’s a sense in which all this is manufacturing itself, all in a harmony, a quality of tension between them.’ And with this phrasing of the Tao-poles he went beyond, into the state from which all reappears. He was all, knew that he knew directly the total history of each least tendril of the energy that makes what is. Or so I surmised from my own experience, as he was silent for half an hour, leaving only the buoy of his last assertion to mark the depths he was exploring.

‘How hard it is to make this energy take shape,’ said the god in him, rounding the bend to return. His nearer levels speculated amazed: these forms of self and world we know are almost arbitrary, what would happen if we let go of the belief or act of will that keeps them as they are, what shapes would it all assume beyond ‘the first purity that inhabits it all?’ As reintegration proceeded, he felt himself becoming the Ten Thousand Things of the Taoist universe; and then as it went further felt the skeins of Harold’s personality recondensing in their complex tangles. So much was coming back to be the drab worn angular stuff it had been! He wept.

It was time to intervene. Lifting his earphone, I told him that it was all his, and that he could choose to remake a different balance in the skeins. He worked at this, and after a time recognized more of the sinuous in what was recondensing, felt its play in what was still largely angular, still not fully warm, but somehow less dull and impoverished than it had been during all the wasteland years.

And he was happy with it. ‘If I have to have substance, this is the form I want it to take, this boundary between the crystalline and the flowing.’ He felt like something stuffed into a sausage or sock, full and bulging oddly. His bladder too was bulging by then, five hours after dropping. I tried to get him to pee, he couldn’t; but soon his reinhabitation of his body had progressed enough that I judged it time to reintroduce him to the world. I announced it cheerily, checked with him that he was ready, lit a candle, doused the light, and took off his headphones and eye-shade.
Going up, he had seen himself as an old scrap of bone. As he blinked around the room, I handed him an old scrap of bone to focus on – a fragment of deer antler, cracked to reveal the core of osseous fibers, delicately and intricately structured for use and from use. The commonplace, the trivial tawdry, revealing itself to him as beautiful-of-the-world, weighted and numinous in the qualities he had come to know. Grasping it clumsily, like a newborn bird he fixated on it for nurture. ‘He’ was only partly there yet; toward the center, he was still subdividing the animate and inanimate, and down here at the end of the tendril of energy he saw the fragment both as branch and bone, and as his flesh.

When he was well-bonded with his talisman, I put pants on his ass, a coat on his back, and levered his stumbling carcass out the door to the porch. Pushed to the distance, the clouds banked a narrow sunset, aglow in dark pastels. The wind was icy after heavy rain. We unzipped. I rested mine on the rail, he of the 26-inch inseam held his underneath it, and we peed off the porch together – as we did at the toilet thirty years before, but now with the order reversed, his tinkle coming as mine was well along. Even so, I was two again, feeling that primordial pleasure, feeling what he was feeling anew, in yet another vivid flash of contact high.

After this blessing of the earth, the flesh, our kinship, we watched the sunset for a while, at one with its mundane perfection, ever-changing; and exchanged platitudes about it, savoring the freshness of their meaning. Then I tried to take him out for a walk, to ground him more fully in the world, in his experience as an animal on this planet. But he was still just re-establishing control over his mechanism, and simply wasn’t enough back in his body yet to make it walk unaided on the ground. Night comes early in the winter mountains, so I lost the chance. But between bone and sun I figured he was well-oriented, and I steered him back up the stairs.

For six hours more, till midnight, he came down from the peak experience, digesting it – mostly in silence, self-absorbed. When I removed his mask I stopped being his memory, and soon withdrew from the rest of tending him, after I blessed him with a ripe persimmon and spread the rest of the simple table for him to glory in, discovering earth’s luscious fruits. Now simply his companion, I ate too, talked a little, but mostly left him to his own inner processes, going out to walk the dog for my excuse. I was a bit spacey and drained myself from the hours of attention, and when I came back I spent my time in the music and my body, beginning to integrate my own experience, as he was integrating his.

His was not a detached, retrospective integration. As his body slowly metabolized the drug, he was still in tenuous contact with the primal melt within; and all the levels of its substantiation continued to work within his consciousness as it ever so slowly cooled down to what we call normal. For most of the evening he watched the fire, which I continued to stoke with the hot-burning manzanita chopped that morning. One limb in particular he saw as human, a child’s; felt as his own. Holding the antler talisman, in organic sympathy of wood and flesh he lay and watched the limb being consumed by the fire, lived its changes to ember, knew himself in this, felt his substance used by the process of life, the child becoming an old man. ‘It is,’ he said, ‘and I’m surprised, I don’t regret it,’ with perhaps a changed perspective on the worn, though death had never scared him.
Infinite in gradations of grey, he saw the small fireplace’s angled walls as a temple, watched luminous colors dance within, absorbed its warmth, and at last began to cry. ‘For the first time I think I understand why Betty wanted a fireplace,’ he said, and recalled all the years he had reacted to it as inessential and expensive, alien to his understandings and desires. This brought him to consciousness of the might-have-been-but-was-unable that grew to break their marriage; and then to the body of love for her that still is live within him. He struggled awhile with this, accepting its weights, not yet clear to a sorrow without regrets, and then moved on, integrating this too.

The candles died, the last log flared on the high-banked embers, I drifted off snuggled beside him under the sleeping-bag, woke at three to find him soundly out, put on some more wood to cut the dawn chill, and fell asleep again. At sun-up I found him gone, out for a hike in a world crystalline with frost. When he returned, we tidied the cabin and packed, and got the car stuck in the old cattle-grate, had to tear home in record time to get me to a meeting. Once we hit the highway, I gave him my notebook, and for eighty miles we went over the experience page by page. Most of what I’d recorded, and all the deepest stuff, he had already forgotten or repressed.

As he read it came back, not fully but enough to accept as his own. ‘A pretty metaphysical drug, huh?’ I said, and helped him sort out the progression and relation of the different levels of his consciousness as the notes revealed these, confirming from my own experiences the reality, or at least the relative universality, of his. As is usual the day after tripping, he was somewhat punched out in his body, with a coupled depression of spirit. I offered him a frame to understand and deal with this; and we talked again about what it meant to his old rigidity, to recognize emotional states that couldn’t be commanded. By the time we hit Berkeley, I had told him what little I know about how to integrate all this in everyday consciousness, about what choices there are. I was only half an hour late to my meeting, and he went home to rest.

Commentary (1972, revised)

Dad had the kind of trip I’d hoped for him. Much contributed: good acid, good environment, good company and fair tending. But the deepest contribution was his own. Ever since I did morning-glory seeds in 1964, he’d been close to people going through psychedelic ritual. All along he had been going through slow and painful changes, to his depths, influenced by his children but in his own way. Venturing nothing rashly or quickly, he came to acid in his own time, prepared by some slowly-growing sense of inner certainty. I had no fear for him; he searched himself for fear, felt almost apologetic at not finding it, and I believed him, he was ready. What he will do with the experience, where he’ll go from it, I have no idea. While we were driving home he said, ‘I think I won’t want to take acid again.’ I asked why. ‘I took it to learn something. I think I’ve learned it.’

And what of me? Harold had deep feelings about my being the one escorting him in this initiation. He bespoke them now and then, I signaled that I understood, and we let it go at that. Not out of shyness, which isn’t our custom. Rather, the whole trip was like that, almost accepted as mundane, special but sandwiched in between our other schedules of special and busy things, nothing to make a fuss over. Still I have my feelings about it, however casual we were in making the arrangements. What a high honor, to help my father come to share experience and perspective so precious to
me! We do not push each other but attend over time; and here many years of slow sharing came to a fruit. I was glad for him, and for myself in having him as fellow-traveler: all the way home it moved me to delighted laughter.

The deeper things I can’t say compactly. How it is to be his son and then in turn his father in leading him through things I have grown through; and then again his son, as he models for me in his late and painful growing what it is to be his age and still alive – all this at once, endlessly and joyfully reflexed into itself, who I am who he is. How fortunate I feel that it has worked out so, with our lives and beings thus intertwined, a closeness that has fed and not imprisoned, ongoing and so rare.