



ABOUT A DOPE

What can you say about getting high? It's a lovely thing socially, to take a common drug, and see one's friends' eyes light up and know you are lighting up in the same way. If you are a lonely person, you no longer feel alone. If you are a person who has been dying to say a million things, it is freedom. If you are someone who needs to stay clear-headed in order to survive, it is not your best friend.

When I was smoking pot every single day, getting high competed with the notion that I might develop into some sort of writer. I was fortunate in my life to be related, through my mother's second marriage, to a poet of some renown, James Wright.

Wright was somehow connected to my half-step-grandmother Elsie's family -- he had lived with her sister Esther when he was a troubled teenager, or something like that, a guardian relationship. Elsie had all his books -- *Saint Judas*, *The Branch Will Not Break*, *The Green Wall* -- in her house in Cleveland, and when I went to visit her I would sit on the window seat and devour them.

Wright elevated self-pity to spiritual levels. He grieved about

his father, about Appalachian Ohio, about a horse he saw once by the roadside. Wright was a writer of great and soulful tenderness, and one of the grievingest writers who ever picked up a pencil.

One day Elsie drove me down to Martin's Ferry, Ohio to actually meet the man, and he and I walked in his cantaloupe garden and he talked about the German writer Theodore Storm, Herman Hesse (whom he had just translated) and others who had that same, heart-aching sadness and hypersensitivity toward life.

Hesse, of course, was one of the foundational authors for hippies, because his characters throw everything away to pursue their soulful dreams. I was already planning some kind of break, and this reference to Hesse fed into my rationale.

Wright had the softest voice. It reminded me of of the solicitous anguish of the computer HAL in the movie *2001*, which we discussed that day in the garden.

In my mind I saw myself becoming his protege. He would read my poems and tell me how great they were, perhaps fixing a line here or there, and we would be like father and son. He and his second wife, Annie, were then fixing up a schoolhouse in Manhattan, where he taught at Hunter College, and she was a teacher. I fantasized about moving in with them, being their handyman, and being his amanuensis, a youthful muse who would astonish all of New York, much like the young Jesus addressing the elders in the temple. I would climb on a scaffold and paint this perfect white clapboard schoolhouse somewhere in midtown Manhattan, and become an avatar throughout the Lower East Side of the well-lived life.

But instead what happened was, I started smoking dope in college. Things became muzzy. My writing started to get complicated and weird. I lost whatever capacity

I might once have had for the simple, graceful lines that Wright wrote, and started imitating what the teachers were teaching -- Faulkner, Woolf, Joyce. I was a catastrophe -- while teachers praised the great writers for writing virtually unintelligibly in horrendous endless unfathomable paragraphs, us kids weren't supposed to do that.

The only class I ever actually flunked in college was Thomas Claeson's creative writing course. "Whatever you're trying to do here," he wrote at the end of one story, "I wish you would stop it."

I was getting high when I wrote, and I was losing my bearings. I just loved the stuff. It was a springboard for me into Dumbo's drunken dream of pink elephants on parade. On dope, one lost a sense of there being a big picture -- instead one saw the very finite small picture, and saw it in rich, lovely, intricate detail. When you heard music, you could see the lines it etched, like a story taking form in technicolor between the five black lines of the musical signature. Dope lured me into silly complexity, and left me there, sorting through stacked cities of pointless but interesting garbage.

I loved it, and for a while I was pretty good at it, offering up my gray matter as a blank canvass on which the sights and sounds of records, or the flame of a candle, or the whorls of my own fingerprints took on a character that was invisible to me when I was "normal." It was, like masturbation, a gift of the gods. Poor people like myself were never more than a dollar or two away from exquisite intellectual entertainment -- intellectual because it engaged the mind in marvelous, untutored ways, and entertainment because, in its confusion and bewilderment, the mind took many loud and unexpected pratfalls.

I was always laughing. Today I have crows-feet that I am convinced were burned into my face during my time with drugs in 1969. Things were funny. The pomposity of adults

and politicians, the clear superiority of our generation over theirs, the linear stupidity of the military mind, the bureaucratic mind, the academic mind, the habits of any mind that had never flipped from their groove and lolled in the sunshine, bright crystals flickering from every aperture.

Being high made any experience transcendent. I remember walking across the college quad on a cold night in March, and being dumbstruck because the snow on the ground caught the light from the streetlamps in such a bewitching way. I remember laughing when an orange I was peeling squirted its orange rind-chemicals into my eyes. I remember being so full of appetite that a friend and I cooked unsalted rice on a hotplate, spread it between two pieces of white bread, and we devoured the mealy mush with stars in our eyes, as if this were paradise, and the gunk in our throats was the meat of the gods.

We came to believe that experience while on dope was inherently superior to experience while not on dope. Why travel to England or Mexico or the Sudan when, for forty cents worth of reefer, one could have an intenser experience right there in the dorm room, with a wet towel stuffed under the doorcrack?

Never mind that, when it was over, it was impossible to retrace one's steps and remember exactly why the song by the Jefferson Airplane, "Coming Back to Me," was so tragically beautiful, or why the Eskimo Pie was sacramental, or why the words, "Why die?" scrawled while under the influence on a piece of paper towel and scotch-taped to the dormitory wall, struck one so forcefully and so unequivocally, as if it opened a window onto a possible world.

That was part of the mystery, and part of its honor. The challenge, after all, was not to sort these experiences into discreet memories, like a miser counting coins he cannot remember earning. The point was to stay stoned, forever, to live that way, torpid, heavy-lidded, and voracious, and to

imagine that the deeper one went into it, the deeper it made one, so deep inside, so deep outside, until in our stoned wisdom of decay we could barely think.

And I gave myself to to this stupid, mind-devouring herb, like an innocent child, as if it were the only thing in the world that I could trust.