

# Celebrating Oblivion

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Preliminary remark: One of the first signs that hashish is beginning to take effect is ‘a dull feeling of foreboding; something strange, ineluctable, is approaching . . . images and chains of images, long-submerged memories appear, whole scenes and situations are experienced . . . typified by a continual alternation of dreaming and waking states, a constant and finally exhausting oscillation between totally different worlds of consciousness.’

‘It is curious that hashish poisoning has not yet been experimentally studied.’

—Walter Benjamin, “*Hashish in Marseilles*”

**T**hey sit on a bed in the corner of the room, gazing pensively in different directions, maintaining some semblance of inconsequential conversation. Their voices are subdued, the tone tentative and guarded. He leans on the wall, staring intently at the cupboard across the room; she lies flat on the bed, eyes drifting across the ceiling. They lean, hesitantly, towards each other even as they continue to ramble on about the most trivial of matters.

The room is dark, illuminated only by a shade of light ebbing from the ceiling. The walls, the tables, the furniture, are all aged, weathered but not dilapidated. Various paraphernalia—books, clothes worn and unworn, misshapen objects indistinguishable in the darkness—lie scattered across the floor like so many toys cast haphazardly aside.

Twilight permeates the room, sneaking through gaps between curtains. A lone fan oscillates with a steady, metallic rhythm, puncturing the pregnant pauses between their sentences, casting intermittent silhouettes across the walls. A multitude of insects, buried in the wilderness beyond, make their presence known, their incessant, almost inaudible chirping peppering the occasional silence.

He stops talking, pausing to ruminate. The peripheral noises grow pervasive, an underwhelming crescendo that speaks directly to him. He turns his head to look at her, puzzled at her reticence, and finds that she is looking

straight at him. Their eyes meet, and for an instant nothing else fills his vision but those two radiant, onyx pupils. Their gazes do not waver, and their eyes appear to carry on the conversation they had put on hold.

There comes the faint strain of music, playing through a pair of small speakers at the foot of the bed. The tune is too soft to identify, easy to ignore. The speakers are perched on a pile of tea-stained books, the mementoes of some bygone classical era. He wonders if she actually reads them.

They look at each other, their eyes searching for a clue to the other's thoughts. Finally, after an eternity—or ten seconds—he stirs, a statue awakening after a protracted, marble repose, and moves closer to her, encroaching on her personal space for the first time. She remains stoic, unmoving, affording no insight into her thoughts; but she continues to look at him, look into him.

A small noise outside interrupts the reverie; he hesitates, instinctively recoiling. She does not respond, choosing instead to sink further into the folds of her bed, still focusing on his face. The song ends, fades into nothing. Another song does not play.

He leans in again, more cautiously than before. Their arms gently touch; neither of them reacts.

The moonlight dwindles; the room dissolves further into deep, mellow black.

She looks at him, and closes her eyes.

The nocturnal din persists, a subliminal hum that refuses to go away.

He closes his eyes, and moves in.

I am in possession of a strange substance. Before I had the fortune, or misfortune, to taste it, I had only heard tales muttered surreptitiously in the dark of night, shady glances thrown here and there. I hear of people taking it, consuming it, only for it to consume them, until they become nothing more than silhouettes of their past selves, like marionettes whose masters have flown the coop and will never come back. I smiled at this, as one smiles at born-again Christians or environmentalists.

But then one day, it gets to me the way dangerous, hazardous materials often do. Not one day—one *night*. Daytime is sunshine and high teas and general exultation; nothing complex could ever happen then. The most monstrous of births, the foulest of plans are hatched at night. Night saturates everything in an ethereal sheen, clouding our judgment.

One of those nights, it got to me. I saw the thing, a delicate gem curled up in the small of my palms and thought, *why not*. I picked it up, caressed it in all its trembling glory; and I shot it straight up into my veins.

I have been addicted since.

It turns out that the It, was (is) a She.

It would be futile and pointless to describe this She, this peddler of poison and pleasure and sensation. Like some demiurge from down below, She seemed to come crawling out of the shadows one night, displaying her wares, speaking in an otherworldly tongue both melodious and malodorous.

I remember our first encounter. We had just met, and I was tentative, hesitant, unsure of her intentions. Her very presence was enough to unsettle me, *displace* me. As the night wore on, I found myself drifting away from myself. I was next to her, and yet I was also the thrum of cicadas outside, the worn fan on the ceiling, the gewgaws smattered across the room. I found myself inexplicably torn by her—a part of me inched ever so closer to her, even as another part of me flew far away. I was besotted by her words, entranced by her penetrating gaze; it was almost impossible to resist taking the gleaming vials of liquid from her hands—somehow, the drugs she offered me were distilled portions of herself.

I was compelled to imbibe her; and She deluged my veins and doused them in flames of ice.

The moment that followed is obscured from me; it seems that I became aware of my own presence nearby, just as I realized that it was impossible for me to do so. I became intoxicated, and the world wheeled away from me as objects betrayed themselves and radiated uncontaminated emotion. My own existence was escaping me, and I was ceding control over the marionette that was myself, to Her. I became overwhelmed with an inexplicable sense of rapture, a sensation approximating bliss. The drug had reached the climax of its potency; it simultaneously reconciled and split apart the disaggregating parts of my self.

But ecstasy cannot be sustained forever.

I am walking through the turnstiles. I am wearing a ring; a miniscule band of silver wrapped around a pink obelisk of flesh, it glitters dimly under the artificial light. I stare at it as a voice from somewhere within the booth asks me questions.

*Don't look back.*

A hint of green streaks through the ring, and I glance up. Floor-to-ceiling windows in all corners and directions contain me; tinted, they darken the world beyond and propagate the illusion of rain. Outside, an interminable expanse of grass and asphalt dash interminably into the horizon, heat waves rippling through the air like gossamer fountains of glass.

I look at the ring again. It is perfectly circular, save for the top which twists into the silhouette of a heart that rests on my finger, almost sinking into the folds of skin. The result is slightly unsettling—wasn't it the man of tin who so desperately desired a living, throbbing heart? What would a living, throbbing finger want with a heart of metal? Maybe having a real heart isn't all it's cracked up to be.

*Don't look back.*

The hallway is Spartan, and sparse; a few stores here, a clutter of benches there, and poker-faced men and women dressed in black, carrying black suitcases and black backpacks and black laptop bags, scurrying to and fro like ants. There is a quiescence about the place, and the people seem to be doing a sort of antisocial dance as they waltz by each other, layers of cashmere and cotton wrapped around entities of unfeeling flesh. Soft muzak pipes through, a complement to the mellow luminescence that bathes the hall. Thoroughly subdued.

*Don't look back!*

I look back. Behind transparent walls in the distance, five figures stand, tiptoeing, straining to catch a glimpse of something, someone. I raise my hand, and wave. There are five people pressed against the barriers; my eyes focus on just one, quietly gazing in my direction, right hand pressed against the glass.

The ring begins to feel tight. It constricts now, and seems to melt into the folds of flesh. I imagine the metal being kissed, caressed by the blood as it bubbles through my veins, contaminating my body with steel and pain.

A stentorian voice announces that it is time.

The sound of machinery and aviation fills the air outside, but inside I can hear only a gentle, ambient hum.

I turn back and walk towards the departure gate.

I left Her behind, the source of my pain, my pleasure. I flew away from Her, as far as I could. The venom I ingested had taken its course, and I was left feeling hollow, as if someone had taken a spoon and scooped out the sweet flesh within. I confined myself to my room—more like a cell—my brain a

toxic quagmire of depression. I *had* to have Her again, and when I didn't, I became withdrawn, a sniveling, cowering form that was no longer Me.

The feeling was horrid, like vitriol accumulating in my chest and slowly coursing through the rest of my body, trickling into my brain and bringing up poisonous memories. I looked around to find some distraction, but found that my pain had ebbed from my body and flowed into the objects around me. My desk, stabbed incessantly with pens, bleeding ink, cried out to me, begging me to end its suffering; the fact that I didn't know how to do such a thing only added to my despair. The bed resembled a wretched creature fossilized in its torturous death throes. The four walls were closing in on me like traps in a mummified Pharaoh's lair. My senses had left me in a hallucinated trance, to die, poisoned and crushed.

Somehow, beyond this agony, beyond the shattering of my being, I felt that *ecstasy* once more! Every fiber, every component of my body seemed to gleam with emotion—not any particular emotion, like joy or sorrow, but *pure emotion*, which leaves you both enthralled and comatose. The feeling of being crushed and consumed persisted, but I realized I was floored not so much by the pain, but by the euphoria that transcended and magnified it. It was somehow *different* from the bliss that I had reveled in that other night; it was laced with something far more malicious. It seems that there are numerous routes to paradise, and She did not have to be there for me to partake of Her. The sheer complexity of the sensation makes it indescribable, and by recounting the feeling I break only a small shard off and use it as a pen, with my blood as ink.

And yet, I feel an overwhelming, masochistic hunger to keep on trying to describe this feeling, even if it bleeds me dry. I am attempting desperately to recount my feelings, my experiences while under the influence, and even though I remember everything as if it had happened a few seconds ago, I find my words sorely inadequate. The inundating nature of the trance is proving bewildering and elusive; it seems to ooze from everything and nothing at the same time. It has seeped into my thoughts, my words, my actions, and I am left pallid and enervated.

But how is this possible? I became engrossed with finding the answer. I played with my memories, turned them over in my mind. I looked at them as both a detached observer and an emotional junkie, attempting to coax some ounce of sense from it all. And I soon realized that my infatuation with Her led me to a lust for something else altogether. Whereas She was more than willing to offer herself to me as an elixir to be greedily imbibed, this other thing, this It, was far more capricious. It teased me, seduced me, threw me

false scents and red herrings and wild geese. It frustrated me—but it also gave me a degustation of Itself, a taste here and there, enough to keep me pining for more, enough to keep me gasping for it as I ran through plains of canvas and metaphors.

Many nights ago, I was introduced to the music of The Mars Volta. Asked to describe their music in a single sentence, the band's guitarist, Omar Rodriguez-Lopez, replied: "A donkey choking [on] a waffle." Crammed with irreverent musical arrangements and dissonant sound manipulation, The Mars Volta recreate the experience of listening to psychedelic rock while ingesting excessive amounts of marijuana (without requiring the drug itself) and then throw in a dose of metal and speed for good measure. Their lyrics appear to be an agglutination of obscure psychological terms and dementia, with passing references to surgical implements.

I love it. That night, I blasted one of their songs at full volume, and for the next five minutes, I could do nothing but sit back as a deluge of noise battered me again and again, sending me into mental convulsions. Against the sonic backdrop of irregular drum tattoos and the waxing and waning of guitars, as the music reached its cacophonous climax, I became amazed at the unfettered intensity of it all. The band seemed to be singing and playing without any direction or intention, save to derive pleasure from their discordant orgies. Unadulterated self indulgence; and yet, because of the music's parochial, confined focus—or *lack* thereof—I inexplicably found myself identifying with their concentrated ecstasy. In the song I listened to, they sing, "Follow me tonight / Follow me into oblivion" ("Ilyena"). After five minutes of palpating soundscapes, I became inclined to do just that.

I was fascinated by how such formlessness, such disregard for meaning, could be so addictive. The Mars Volta thumbed their noses in the face of coherence and significance, and in doing so they were rewarded. Their songs contained no delusional ideas nor insights; instead the musicians reveled in chaos and ambiguity, accepting them without being able entirely to conceive of and resolve them. It is the quintessential paradox of the chase—when you give up the hunt, your prey comes to you willingly. Keep your distance long enough, and you will reach what you've wanted all along.

Repressing my instincts, I gave up my pursuit—and found It waiting for me, in the form of Roland Barthes. In "Leaving the Movie Theater," Barthes tells us to be "fascinated *twice over*, by the image and by its surroundings—as

if I had two bodies at the same time: a narcissistic body which gazes, lost into the engulfing mirror, and a perverse body, ready to fetishize not the image but precisely what exceeds it. . . . I am hypnotized by . . . an amorous distance . . . a possible bliss of *discretion*” (348). I had to recognize my addiction—to It, to Her—to be able to appreciate it and transcend it. But somehow, when I do overcome my desire, I fuel my addiction even more. I want It. I want Her.

I want You. That was what was going through my mind that first night, when You lured me in; and that is what I am left with now as I write, struggling with phantom thirsts and desire. That is the crux of what I wanted to tell You, the end product of all my struggles with poison and its highs—desire. My trauma gave way to something far more powerful, far more universal; my pain made my implicit feelings for You all the more pronounced. Desire is neither paradise nor Hades; it is the intersection of the two, a mixture of ecstasy and pain. Your presence that night sharpened my desire for You; and somehow, Your absence from the here and now, from *my* here and now, did the exact same thing.

What I have is no ordinary drug; it disembowels me and leaves my viscera splayed across reality and fantasy, and I enjoy every minute of it. It plays in countless concert halls worldwide, to an audience of one, who chokes on his own waffle. I celebrate my own waffle, delighting in its anarchy and formlessness. I am an addict, huddling in a dark, dilapidated room as people on the outside smile condescendingly at my vacuous expressions and wonder why I destroy myself.

This is why: my narcotic lets me wander through the Elysian fields, past the midden pinnacles of Hades, past Inferno and Purgatorio and Paradiso and all that jazz, sending me into throes of delirium, born of either jubilation or commiseration or both. When I take it, I feel omnipotent and delusional and empowered and exultant, and I realize now that I couldn’t care less about how all this is possible.

You flew here, far away, to visit me. I remember the trepidation I felt at the airport, the trembling of my body as I waited, anxiously, for you; and I remember too that familiar feeling of elation when you appeared, when I drank you in once more. The rest is a haze, an ivory limbo of actions and conversations, sublimated, refined, powdered, and placed into small plastic bags of memory for consumption.

I remember one thing. We sit on my bed, in a corner of the room. We look straight at each other, without reserve or reluctance. What we are say-

ing is inconsequential—at least at this moment, in this realm. It is daytime, and sunlight anoints the room, producing misshapen shadows that indulge in orgies on the walls.

We lie down, leaning into each other, intertwined to form some composite beast. The immensity of the moment forces me to look away. I stare distractedly at the posters on the wall, the blinking alarm on my desk, the objects splattered across my room; to me, they appear to be the most beautiful things in the universe.

I cannot describe how it feels, with You dissolving into me, running free through pore and bone and sinew. I will never be able to; it would be pure delusion to think otherwise. But I want to, I have to, I long for that tantalizing moment, when I swallow those delicate drops of oblivion, and You devour me once more.

I look back, and I see myself, pressed against reality, peering at me looking at You. A delicate gem, a work of art, the source of my joy and sorrow and pain and pleasure. I know better now.

*Why not?*

I close my eyes, and I move in.

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