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James Ryan

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Visions Through a Window Pane

James Ryan

I saw God when I was sixteen; coincidentally, it was the first time I tried LSD. It wasn't only me; Big Mike, Ron and Mexican Joe went along for the trip. It wasn't so much God, but the unequivocal knowledge that there is one, somewhere. We were starved for distractions and adventure in the big city, and each summer night some force made us yearn for the next one.

We had been caught numerous times on Holy Innocent's Church steps swilling Old Style beer, Chicago's favorite, and cheap liquor. Boone's Farm wine, Strawberry Hill specifically, was a new addition to our palate. As a musical group, we spent almost every hour of every day together, except when we went home to crash. On those steps we practiced the songs we played, some of them ours, but mostly covers. I could find a sound in anything I struck with my sticks and concrete had a snappy sound and feel for paradiddles and fills. Ron walked around with his acoustic guitar strapped across his back like Bob Dylan all day long. While Mike who played bass and Mexican Joe on keys didn't have their instruments, we all sang in surprising harmony. Often, the cops came and called our evening, moving us along as if we were crooning street junkies gathered on corners in the black side of town.

Father Pajak, the senior priest, who had grown tired of a lot of things including us, shaking his head as he approached, always suggested we join the

parish youth group; or, he could just tell our parents. He would be lucky to find someone among us who cared; but, Big Mike's Dad would kick all of our asses. He was a Precinct Captain and in those days you weren't getting anything from the city in the way of services unless you voted right, which meant for Daley, and you sure weren't getting any garbage cans. Chicago used the steel, 55 gallon kind that the garbage men wheeled around with one hand and tossed on the back of the garbage truck as if they were toys. Garbage men nowadays with their plastic cans and automatic lifters are a joke. Everyone who worked for the city was only a few degrees away from the Mob. Those goons put people in those garbage cans, and they were never seen again. So, Mike's dad scared the shit out of us and we understood that bringing trouble to his door was not good.

We wanted to "suggest" to Father Pajak that he watch his junior priest, Father Richard, who often drank beer with us. It was on all of our minds as we glanced at each other with the same thought. We didn't, though, not wanting to get Father Richard in trouble, just like we didn't want to get Big Mike in trouble or wind up in a garbage can. Father Pajak, hunch-backed and muscular, not one for conversation, his tight lips usually clamped on a burning cigarette whose smoke stung his eyes, mumbled unknowns through a Cheshire cat grin.

When he captured you alone, he always put his hand out and the handshake lasted uncomfortably long and warm and moist. We never really understood everything he said but we felt it came from the darkest side of the vagaries of human character; nowhere we were qualified to tread. Father Pajak, in his black, ash-covered suit was untouchable on many levels. Either way we turned, our fate was somehow eternal.

One summer night, in that same year, we were sitting on the school steps, next to the church, drinking beer and grab-assing. Big Mike was there, sitting like Buddha with a beer in each hand. We'd look at him when he did this until he noticed. He started perplexed, told us to "go fuck yourselves" and returned to the dilemma he pondered. Mexican Joe, after a few beers was always aggressively friendly and your struggle to get away from his bear hugs often became life or death. Mexican Joe had no Mayan blood in him; he was the biggest Mexican guy I have ever known. At six-four and 280 pounds, his laugh began with a scream in your ear since he was usually holding you off of the ground. Ron often strummed his guitar even as we talked, and our words followed his chords in key. A few others were with us, guys and girls, one of them being Sherry. She was older than us by a few years, long-legged and shapely. She gave you that coy look that was most interesting to the guys; "Imagine what I know," was what

it said to us. She lived across the street from the church above a boarded-up neighborhood store. During the evenings that she didn't come outside we gazed up at her lighted windows and wondered what she was doing. Each time her silhouette would pass the window everyone would stop talking. This particular evening was her birthday; we all fantasized at how she wanted to celebrate her 22nd birthday.

Father Richard emerged from behind the school, which meant he left the rectory by the back door, circling around a large grotto the priests and nuns used for prayer and contemplation. He was dressed in "civilian" clothes: no black suit, no white collar but a white polo shirt under a navy blazer, khakis and boat shoes without socks. He declined the beer offered to him and shrugged off our howls at his clothes. "We don't always dress in the uniform," he said. Father Richard was only about 28 years old and we could not figure out why he was a priest. He didn't smoke or threaten you; he drank beer and seemed to like people. One of the requisites for Catholic priests, as far as we knew, was a God driven disgust with the human race except when they left large amounts of money in the collection basket.

We told him this was a special night. "I'm 24," Sherry chimed in, giving Father Richard that look. Before we could open our mouths about her adding a couple

years to her age, Father Richard grabbed her around the waist, pulled her to him and full-mouth kissed her, right in front of us. We couldn't have been any more shocked if he had kissed us. After a very long time, he let her go, gave her that "imagine what I know" look and walked away. He glanced at us and winked, like we were all in on it. Sherry recovered after a few minutes of trying to get her face to turn back from red to normal. It wasn't embarrassed red, but over-heated red, like she'd run a marathon. Everyone just stood there looking at her and at Father Richard as he backed the priest's black Ford out of its parking space and drove away. Before we could say anything Sherry looked not at us, but through us, "I gotta go guys, thanks for the beer." She was gone and so were all our hopes. Ron said it for all of us, "Man!" His horse-hair flopped over the front of his hang-dog, horse-head as he strummed an off-note on the guitar. It was the first time I ever saw Mexican Joe lose his smile. She was just one more hope dashed.

In preparation for our involuntary, first youth group meeting we made our "connection" come through for us: four hits of Window Pane acid. Diego, one of the first Puerto Ricans in our neighborhood, grew up with us but spun off to join a local faction of the Latin Kings street gang. The gang never bothered us, probably because of Diego. He came around occasionally wearing his black and

grey gang sweater, making us wonder if it made us all a target of a rival gang, and he seemed to regret when we all left for home at the end of an evening. He would leave with us but not head toward home, but into the night streets.

We chose from a menu of hallucinogens; we vowed then to try them all through the empty summer evenings: Blotter Acid, Purple Microdot, Purple Haze, Magic Mushrooms, Peyote, Hashish, Opium – our summer was planned. We had smoked weed before, but this situation, youth group, required drastic diversion. For the novice, some advice: a whole hit of acid to yourself isn't a good idea. I took my one-quarter inch square piece of plastic-like red Window Pane and placed it on my tongue. It didn't dissolve fast and I was afraid I'd lose it between my teeth. It was more than a half-hour before anything changed.

Youth activities at Holy Innocents consisted of mass, Catholic's service, which then adjourned to the parish hall for music and such to sooth the savage teenage mind. Little did they know the condition of our minds. "Holy Shit!" I shouted and ducked walking up the front steps of Holy Innocents Church. We hadn't even gotten into the church when the concrete saints above the door pointed and threatened to pee on our heads as we passed underneath. Laughing and gyrating, their sandy countenance shape shifted and changed colors.

Organ music growled from inside and met us in the vestibule clad in a gold-

colored mist; my whole body hummed with each note and my breath paralleled the crescendos of the music. The maniacal organist, who I saw laughing and skeletal in my peripheral vision, pounded the ivory keys with skinless fingers.

Seated in the nave, the procession cross, flanked by figures of floating arcana - tarot card figures dressed in velvet and opals and jointless jacks of spades and diamonds, dripped with blood as it passed. As is the tradition, I bowed, so low that I hit my head on the pew in front of me. It was a solid-oak epiphany that caused my friends to hoot like owls and me to realize the reason for Chia Pets.

I realized, as the celebrants ascended the altar, that the candles around them were alive and made sounds like the seductive hum of a lover. The statuary shed their symbolic clothing and danced like Woodstock hippies, smiling pointed teeth and wagging their tongues obscenely at us. From the right side of the altar Mother Mary came to me and I nearly had an orgasm. I tried to apologize to her, "I'm not even Catholic." The glow of candle light swirled around her maiden's head as she smiled approvingly and took off her veil.

Father Pajak appeared between us like a miracle. He worked an oversized Lucky Strike cigarette in his mouth and smoke poured into my eyes like liquid. No sound came from him but I had to grab my ears as he mumbled words whose echo caused ripples in the air. Long strands of web wrapped themselves around

us pulling us along, out of our pews and outside of the church. We were carried out to the sidewalk by waves of organ breeze coming out of the huge brass pipes that waved like a wheat field.

On the sidewalk outside, as a part of a white water rafting crew, I paddled fiercely with the waves as we made our way to the parish hall. Father Richard rode behind me and cupped my ass-cheeks with his hands, helping me along over the rocky rapids that nearly threw us to the curb. Our crotches were soaking wet by the time we got there. Low-riders cruised along with us in the streets, boat-sized yellow Chevys with red fur interiors. Wild timbales accentuated Santana's guitar riffs as Latina girls danced in the back seats.

The parish hall was mainly a bingo parlor and the home to the Catholic Men's Club. They received daily shipments from brewery distributors, met by the priest's black Ford and the nun's black Ford station wagon, taking their tithe, and disappearing as fast as they had come. The hall was the size of two basketball courts and was now filled with chairs and tables of food provided by the Catholic Mother's Club. The hall was most often used for gambling nights said to be held to fund the church. A moveable stage filled one of the short walls and from it large speakers sent streams of tentacles out to us in the form of some Barbara Streisand song that made small but inevitably deadly nicks on

my skull. Seated at King Arthur's Round Table, somebody began passing a fifth of Old Grand Dad around underneath the table so we could fill our soda cans. I drank my soda down fast to empty it and brown foam shot from my ears. After filling my can with cheap whiskey, Moses wielding a machine gun splintered the area to each side of the stage, sending fragments of Streisand's notes bleeding to the floor. The acid was turning violent and I knew I had to fight the tendency to follow it.

Father Richard, dressed like Dr. Frank-N-Furter from the Rocky Horror Picture Show, strutted on the stage and said we had a treat this evening, "We have a live band for your entertainment tonight." He said it was a local band that played dances and outdoor venues and...it started to sound familiar. "Bent Halo!" He looked at our table and gave us a full-toothed donkey laugh. His voice reverberated under the table and melted the can in my hand. Old Grand Dad whiskey vapors wafted up from the floor; they filled my nose like fire. "Hey, that's our band," I shouted. No one turned; I hadn't said it out loud. "Nobody told me I was going to have to play on acid!" I am not sure if I said that out loud either, but the other four members of the band seemed to think it was funny because their heads expanded like beach balls and then deflated with deafening whistles.

Apparently, they all knew as they floated toward the stage.

Big Mike, our bassist and sound man, led me to my drum kit which he set up for me better than I could and positioned my zombie-body in front of the throne. He walked away in slow-motion, growing in size with each step, toward the board that controlled the sound for each instrument. Seven thousand rippling drum heads stared back at me like eternal eyes, reflecting the red, green and blue stage lights in their acrylic orbs. A thousand winking cymbals shimmered. Two drumsticks appeared in my hands, writhing like snakes and I recoiled as they tried to bite. They were black mambas, licorice death. As strange as it all seemed I knew, I always knew, that that drum kit was my savior and playing it took me somewhere else, away from this Chicago ghetto.

Our beginning set began with Aerosmith's live version of "Train Kept a'Rollin'" It began with a snare drum run simulating a train's steam engine sound, played by increasing tempo and volume. It was enough to cramp your hands until you had practiced it a thousand times. I had snakes for sticks and now, tree bark growing on my hands and arms that attracted flocks of woodpeckers. Huge Pileated Woodpeckers with bobbing red crests moved in slow motion and weighed heavily on each arm. Black, railroad spike beaks plunged into each arm with the rhythm of my strokes. The guitar began, whaaaa-whaaa, like a train whistle, and I continued my run on the snare, slow at first, hard to shake the

birds that fought to hang on, heavy bark splintering as they frantically stabbed at my arms. Ron's horse hair shook over the guitar neck as he played, his right hoof tapping time as his Centaur body rocked from side to side. As I shook the birds off and the flow of music started coursing through me, my hands grew light and fast, my speed picking up, the train gaining speed, and power, the steam whistle blew through my body, whaa-whaa, and everyone was set to join in with the main part of the song. It began with the end of the train's speedy beginning and a thunderously lonely double-flam on the floor tom. What played through me, I realized, is what played through everyone if we would let it. We all have it: God in us.

I disappeared into the depths of the twenty-two inch floor tom and played in dreams for hours. The acid wore off slowly, steadily; regular visions invaded my new reality.

The next day, I longed for the brief visions to again come in; I welcomed them hungrily as I picked small bits of wood and feathers from my clothes.