

An Ecumenical Matter

March 2022

Let me say immediately that this is hardly a novel idea. I am far from the first person to write about doing drugs. It's certain that this essay is simply the latest in a long line which address the topic in the context of Mardi Gras. I doubt I'm even the first to chronicle the experience of being profoundly fucked up while impersonating a member of the clergy. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to commit a particularly memorable day in mid-March to the page. This is my report, my Mardi Gras as a bishop on acid.

We begin in the Bywater at around eight am, embarking on a parade that will eventually be suckered whole into the heart of darkness. Our dramatis personae are myself - dressed as a bishop - and my wife, who for reasons surpassing understanding decided the other minor piece in our chess set needs to be the *rook*. So she's dressed as a piece of medieval architecture. Our other friends were mostly dressed as lost Germans, apart from one who owned a kilt. It took me an embarrassingly long time to realise he wasn't one of those highland Bavarians. These people will play a large role in the experience of the day but a necessarily diminished one in its recounting.

Before continuing, it's important to note the variance in experience one can have while tripping, and the illusion of chemically manufactured profundity it can induce. By way of example, I am originally from the UK, and in the final days of 2021 I found myself stuck in my childhood bedroom, an early victim of the new and improved Omicron variant. It had been nearly three years since I'd last managed to return home, and my medical incarceration was so poorly timed as to be comic. I had travelled 5000 miles just to reacquaint myself with my teenage wank dungeon. By pure chance, I happened to have several tabs of acid in my possession. There is of course an irresistible logic that follows from these facts. What better time is there to open the doors of perception?

I'd only intended to take a half, and sand the edge off reality, but such intentions dissolve pretty quickly when you're isolated from everything but yourself. Before long, the world starts to take on a more disordered quality, where causality becomes confused and past and present commute. *Then* the acid really drops. It warps the world around you, turning mirrors into a maze of post-Euclidean geometry, and coating reality itself with a film of psychedelic soap. My memory of it was as a profound awakening where I confronted the animating forces of the universe. In reality I spent twelve hours just *hammering* out messages to people on both sides of the Atlantic, becoming a flywheel of deranged questions

like whether beds exist. This is unfortunately the nature of anything that offers wisdom with a four hour half-life.

So with the memory of friendship-ruining 3am screeds fresh in my mind, I question whether willingly subjecting myself to the same potency of experience is really a good idea. Basic compulsion carries the day though, and I decide that it is in fact *absolutely* the place to drop more acid than I can possibly sensibly deal with. I cannot tell you how much I took because as the day goes on it will turn out to be both far too much and not nearly enough. During the covid interregnum I have forgotten that Mardi Gras is a spectrum of celebration too broad for a repressed Englishman to truly comprehend. Before long every street corner will host some uninhibited soul carrying out their personal fetish to a very public climax. The edge between the sacred and profane is omnipresent, and there is always some pervert actively grinding against it. This year I want that pervert to be *me*. On acid.

It takes time to build up to that sort of carnage though, and the first hour or so is spent ambling at an agreeable pace, drifting on one of many tributaries flowing towards the party proper. My first clue that I was really taking off was being forced to confront another priest. My halting blessing and schoolboy latin were no match for their austere mastery of the Roman catechism. It became a nagging thought that I might *actually* be talking to a priest, or at least someone far too comfortable in a dog collar for it not to be a kink. You can insert your own joke about the Roman Catholic clergy here by the way. By this point one of the lost German friends - let's call her the acolyte - finds the bag of communion wafers I'd bought off the internet. She immediately tries to offer this pseudo-priest what she calls a "christ cracker". He lays a hand on her shoulder, and with beatific calm says the devil has put some sin into her. Just before we move on, an acquaintance of this might-be man of God appears and declares it to be the first time they had seen him with clothes on, making the question of whether this man has really taken the vows even *more* distressingly ambiguous.

This was the first taste of the recurring religiosity that the world will simply bring to you when you're dressed as a bishop on acid. Not long after this the juices are starting to flow, and I'm really starting to inhabit my role as a bringer of righteousness. This largely entails trying on some awful cod accent, pretending to be Jude Law pretending to be from New York. I'm told it's still getting notices from local critics. The vast majority of my duties are to administer rites and sanction blessings to the fellow pilgrims. The streets are a great flock calling me father and begging for benediction. This is clearly what the pope feels like all the time, and I'm beginning to think I should apply. Perhaps I should just have my own religion -

Yes, acid has definitely arrived. The acolyte just cannot get those communion wafers out of her head, and has been going ahead like John the baptist to get people ready to receive communion. She is just madly pressing the host into people's hands and mouths before immediately telling them "it's not drugs". The disappointment is palpable. This anti-fun counter reformation inevitably brings up how much better this would be if they really *had* been laced. There was however no miracle of the dosing of the five thousand, and the wafers re-

mained stubbornly untransportative. This is probably for the best, as I'm fairly sure mass drugging is the modus operandi of particularly nihilistic cults. Still, I've added it to my list of things to do when I'm too powerful to be stopped.

We continue our wandering, edging closer the the french quarter. The parade becomes more depraved by degrees, nicely pairing with my loosening grip on reality. The crush of the crowd, and its ceaseless manufacture of sight and sound and *sweat* threatens to overwhelm me. I would be lying if I said I remember much more from this phase than a haze of colour, and an absolute profusion of gimps. By now it is becoming difficult to communicate with the outside world, because it feels like the fucking star system is crash landing into my frontal cortex. Meanwhile, our group has been organising and cohering, *becoming stronger*. This prompts periodic stops in bars to piss out the liquid fuel that's keeping the day going. Not coincidentally, I keep coming into closer contact with my psyche in each of those horribly squalid little toilets that I have forgotten to turn the lights on in. At some point we duck into the what has to be the darkest bar I have ever seen. The path to the toilets feels like a plunge into the Stygian pit, lit only by a neon strip of red, as if we're about to become victims of a particularly radical plane crash. I am at the fucking limit of my orientational skills just to locate the urinal, but once I've begun I've realised that the walls themselves have a mosaiced admonishment to safe sex written across the whole wall. I wonder if this is the work of an interior decorator having a very productive nervous breakdown. This was I believe real.

I am now a self-propelled prop, beyond any kind of rational conversation and needing to be shepherded from point to point by the group. After one particularly intense sojourn into the inky night of public toilets, my friend the acolyte asks how I'm doing. Truthfully I'm grappling with the fact that this is all going to last a *long* time, and it feels like some fairly important higher brain function is permanently disintegrating. They helpfully agree and tell me I'm completely stuck like this now, and the parades are penning us in for a mile in each direction like a pack of velociraptors. I want to stress that this is hardly a statement that will comfort you while clinging onto cognisance by your fingertips, although I can't discount the possibility she didn't actually say it. Whether real or imagined though, I found this guided missile of what *not* to tell someone at that moment unbearably funny, and was perked right up.

By now the degeneration is in full swing, and we end up behind the stage of a drag contest on Bourbon street. These costumes are absolutely bonkers, to the point that their artisans have passed through sex as a meaningful canvas and landed straight at dressing like Doctor Who villains. There was - I shit you not - a character called the "spider queen" sporting an absolute *cathedral* of latex, which in turn needed the support of an entourage of leather daddies. They were wasted not doing battle with David Tennant in space. This actually brought up the uncomfortable economic reality of drag, insofar as it's almost certain all the people doing this need to be accountants at KPMG or some other similarly well-heeled career to support what looks like a staggering financial burden. Their real passion might be looking like a full body penis holster, but they need to sell pensions to do it. This plight of the pervert prompted a period of intense

introspection while wandering the streets, and elides into a generalised sadness at the frustrated lives we all have to lead. Ukraine is having a bad time right now, but all three of its hippies must just be fucking *miserable* at the moment. Thoughts like this are interrupted only by minor things like being accosted by an absolute horde of Midwesterners dressed as demons, replete with fifty cent plastic pitchforks. Being dressed as a bishop, it was inevitable that they surrounded me, forcing me into a group photo for just slightly longer than felt necessary. Throughout this ambush my group were just continuously mouthing “are you okay” as if there was any power on earth that could prise me away from my very drunk, very middle aged captors. I learned a few things about myself in this peak, largely making my peace with the fact that crotchless leather undergarments will just never really be me. I simply lack the panache to pull it off.

We eventually escape the quarter, and enjoy a pleasant interlude on the banks of the Mississippi. There are actual Christians here who seem to want to be elbow deep in this restoration of Sodom, just to prove how intolerant they can be of it. It bothers the acolyte more, but I unleash the epic wisdom that small mindedness is its own punishment. I feel very pleased with that until about an hour later when I realise what a load of old bollocks it is, and resolve they should just all be shot. Believing violence is a solution to social tension is surely a sign that I’m on the road back to being a right thinking member of society, and that internal equilibrium is being restored. It’s now that we reach the wandering in the desert part of the trip, and I start to convince myself that I am becoming more sober as the world around me gets thrown increasingly off kilter. This is a bare faced lie as most of the architecture is continuing to wave at me. One of our group who’d earlier split off to go check out Zulu now reappears with a literal medal for getting to another parade on their own. This was pretty Cambellian stuff and no mistake. Besides the regular interludes to the post Soviet dystopias that every portable toilet was rapidly becoming, things had settled into a new rhythm closer to reality. I am left guarding the corner of Canal street while kebabs are acquired.

This is the skeezy time and place where a decidedly more toothesome element joins the party. The whole experience of watching the world go by is somewhat serrated, with the lost Asian tourists being chased by homeless meth addicts. I exaggerate, but not by much. Some profoundly drunk siblings are attracted by the fact one of us has their parade survivor’s medal, worn with a calculated insouciance that suggests they got it for destroying the death star. These new interlocutors were at each at least three levels beyond “too drunk”, an almost unimaginable feat today of all days. I don’t know why, but watching them stagger away was like watching a child leave home for the first time, prancing gaily into an eight lane motorway mincer. The foot traffic along Canal was also taking a decisive turn away from the merely whimsical or harmlessly sordid. Some people were sending decidedly mixed signals, dressed like hippy pirates but with big violent rapist energy. One just looked a bit too *determined* while wielding that rainbow foam scimitar. I cheered up though when I saw a singularly prepossessed man in a suit stride along the street like their father

owned it. Genuinely by the end of the night that man was either going to be crowned king of the universe or stabbed 58 times in the sternum.

We go and eat our Greek food down by the riverfront, psychically riven and spiritually drained. The only thing that remains is the long walk home, the road to perdition. My wife's castle costume is chucked in the bin, and my own vestments are ceremonially balled up and stuffed in a rucksack full of leaking beer cans. Our route home has us undergoing a few more dramatic transitions, both within and without. There is a moment while walking under the interstate overpass, hemmed in on all sides by the tent city of luckless vagrants, that engenders some slight trepidation. This is somewhat assuaged by the fact that you're not the guy who has got so drunk and lost that they are now wandering aimlessly in the middle of a four lane intersection, boxed in by the endless cycle of traffic lights they can't *quite* predict.

The further we get from that writhing mass in the French quarter, the more the city begins to feel like a slightly confused version of itself. Yes there's another man in a getup too ludicrously garish, and far too *on a bicycle* to look that angry, but this is the exception rather than the norm. We eventually turn onto the thoroughfare that *had* been one of the main parade routes, and are greeted by a scene of almost unfathomable carnage. This feels like a rather festive natural disaster - the apocalypse by way of Liberace, a dirty bomb laced with glitter. It was in essence a bit of a mess. This was however a mess in the process of being swept forcefully off the face of the planet by a small army of city workers. It was a calming, meditative experience to stroll down St. Charles, watching this act of metamorphosis - a temporary pushback against entropy. Block by block the avalanche of plastic crap yielded to streets that had undergone the cleansing blast of heavy machinery, a wave of detritus swept away to return functioning - but eerily empty - boulevards. We managed to catch a streetcar home after watching this immense act of urban ecology unwind. It was nice.

Wife collapses in bed. I saddle up the dog for a walk, with my last cigarette clenched between my teeth and music shuffling into my headphones.

I have learned nothing. I feel *very* cool.