

The Best Bad Girl

“The main reason Santa is so jolly is because he knows where all the bad girls live.”

George Carlin

The best part of that night was the before. The anticipation.

I was a breathless 15-year-old, smitten with high school drama and risk taking, relentless in my nocturnal weekend prowls for adventure and romance, my only ambition to become the best bad girl, ready with a fistful of lies to fend off my mother’s interrogations about where I was going and when I’d be home.

I remember the violet and blue silk blouse I borrowed from my mother with the cinched waist and the French cufflinks that served as buttons for the front of the blouse and the sleeves. The cufflinks were tiny gold crowns with tinier faux-diamond chips. The vintage elegance of the blouse and its navy-blue silk retro jacket stood in stark contrast to my hip hugger bell bottom jeans and espadrilles, making me appear a slight bit edgy and unconventional. That’s the look I was going for. I smudged kohl eyeliner above and below my eyes to give me a smoky-eyed, smoldering look, without being so heavy-handed that my mother would make me wash my face if she saw me. Inhaling deeply as I inspected myself one last time, I paused to smell the heavy ripeness of the lilacs that grew below my bedroom and listen to the hum of honeybees foraging for nectar and pollen before the sun set. I removed the quarter tab of acid—orange-barrel sunshine acid—from the powder compact in my make-up bag, dropped it in the center of my tongue and allowed it to dissolve completely.

Kyle had told Alexis and me that the acid would take 45 minutes to an hour to take effect. Kyle had also given us instructions, “There’s a quarter tab for each of you. No more and no less since this is your first time doing acid. Stay away from alcohol, pot, any other drugs, and mirrors. Mirrors are really spooky on psychedelics. If you do what I’m telling you, you’ll still be a little high at midnight, but you’ll be ok to see your parents.”

By the time I walked down the flagstone path to the Short’s backyard, the party was in full swing. So was I. The boys, Kyle, Pete, and Joe had picked up Alexis and me at 7:00. Alexis was my best

friend and Kyle's girlfriend. Pete and Joe were good friends of Kyle's, and Joe was in Kyle's band. The acid had only just started to tighten its grip on me. I had removed my three-inch high espadrille sandals because I felt wobbly, and now I couldn't remember where I'd left them. This made me laugh.

The soles of my bare feet floated across Bob Short's velveteen lawn, my toes combing through the dense blades of grass and tracing invisible designs on it. I noticed the Cypress trees that bordered the Short's ample yard. They swung dreamily in the breeze like an animation of Van Gogh. More giggles bubbled up from my throat.

From their country garden, I smelled the green, fresh fragrance of the hyacinth that shared flowerbeds with tulips, daffodils, and tiger lilies. While the scent felt clean and spring-like tonight, the day would soon come when I could only discern the hyacinth's earthier, more fecal, undertones. Within a few days, hyacinths would only remind me of the risks I took that night without any consideration of consequences, and the trouble that ensued.

But that night, I wasn't frightened by the unpredictable nature of psychedelics. I welcomed it. I was headstrong on that cloudless, constellation-filled night, determined to shatter my innocence and forge my true identity. I thought about how romantic it would be to have a constellation named after me. I was convinced that on this night, after this acid trip, I wouldn't have to compete for my place in the world anymore. I would be part of a group. Once and for all, I would truly belong.

As the acid started to take hold, the world appeared as if backlit by a gauzy scrim, shapes and colors filtering through it kaleidoscopically. My view was opaque and transparent by turns. I was sitting on Pete's lap kissing him. Pete's Australian accent was a real turn-on. I'd never experienced a kiss as sensual as this. Was it the acid playing with me, or could it be that he loved me? Maybe we'd become a couple. I heard myself say to him, this young man whom I'd only met once before tonight, "I think I love you. Tell me what you want. I'll give you anything." He smiled. We kissed some more.

Bobby Short, the host, came over offering a tray of Cokes, Diet Pepsis and 7-ups. I was beyond thirsty and took a 7-up. I downed the entire can within minutes. Bobby came back later and said that he had spiked all the 7-ups with a tab of acid each. The Cokes and Diet Pepsis were pure. Later, I thought about my father's one-time advice about drinking. He warned me to avoid mixing alcohol with soda,

saying the sugar and effervescence accelerated the speed of getting drunk or high. He said they were catalytic agents, efficiently mixing the intoxicants into the bloodstream. After the 7-up, my memory turned brown. Sometimes black. Later, I wouldn't be able to differentiate fact from fiction about that night. There were too many gaps.

I vaguely recollect a visit to the powder room when I looked in the mirror. The boys had told me not to look in the mirror, but it's a reflex. My reflection was terrifying. My face started melting like celluloid left too long in front of a hot burning light. I disappeared into the curling ashen edges of the celluloid, my identity slipping and sliding, glowing red hot, until I was rescued by Kyle and escorted from the bathroom.

I heard Kyle tell the others that I was really stoked and I remember leaving the party shortly afterwards with Alexis, Kyle, Pete and Joe, and heading to Jack's house in Eastchester. Jack went to the same prep school as the others and he was the one who sold the acid. The guys wanted to bring me down from my high before dropping me and Alexis off at midnight.

Pete was driving down Ardsley Road, lovingly referred to by locals as Break Neck Hill because of the road's steep twists and turns that made it an inherently dangerous road to drive on. Break Neck Hill was legendary for accidents and casualties. I was sitting on Pete's lap, facing front towards the wind shield, my hands on the steering wheel, legs resting on his as he pumped the accelerator and brakes. At 15, I didn't yet have my license and didn't know how to drive. Pete told me what a good driver I was and reminded me in his sexy Australian accent to keep my eyes on the road.

Eventually we arrived at Jack's and we went to the finished basement, far away from his parents who watched television on the second floor of their split-level house. Somebody, possibly me, had spilled soda on the beautiful blouse my mother had lent me, shredding the fine silk into wet, sugary ribbons. The ribbons of silk moved when I did, swaying like a grass skirt, sometimes revealing my bare midriff and bra, sometimes sticking to my ribs. The movement of the silk ribbons prompted me to twirl around the pillars in the basement. I'm sure I looked like a dervish, whirling and manic, shouting to anyone who would listen "I want sex. I want sex." It sounded like a transcendental meditation mantra, my equivalent of the OM.

An incandescent pearl light cast a shallow glow across the late, night sky. It was midnight, the designated curfew, and the moon was high. Kyle parked the car across from my house, begging me to be quiet as they helped me out of the back seat. Kyle, Joe and Pete dragged me up the ten stone steps of my house, with Alexis trailing behind. I was told later that they tried to sneak me through the living room to the stair case on the other side, hoping they could get me up three flights to my room, tuck me into my bed and make a clean getaway without awakening my parents or bumping into Dr. Jovanovich, Alexis's draconian father, who was scheduled to pick up Alexis at any moment. The plan was aborted with the appearance of my mother. She was waiting up for us in the library and heard the commotion. From what I've been told, she quickly deduced that something was dreadfully wrong.

For starters, the two boys were holding my dead weight in their arms, one at the head and one at the feet, as if I was a hammock. My mother's silk blouse was torn to ribbons, and my eyes were rolling up into my head like I was suffering a seizure.

Alexis was pulling at clumps of her hair, looking for bugs she thought had nested there. When she saw my mother enter the room, she quickly sat in the rocking chair. She pumped furiously and sang a Ukrainian song to sooth herself. My mother glanced at her, then back at us.

"What happened to Jill? What have you done to her?"

"Nothing. We didn't do anything. She had too much to drink, that's all."

"She doesn't look drunk to me." My mother leaned in close to me to smell my breath. She looked at my eyes and saw that my pupils were dilated a huge black. She became frantic, "What have you done to her? What did she take?"

The boys looked at each other. Then Kyle answered, "We think somebody slipped her something in a drink."

"Oh my God!" my mother exclaimed.

The rocking chair squeaked behind them.

All eyes turned to look at Alexis. She was singing faster.

At precisely that moment, Dr. Jovanovich came through the open front door. He was a towering figure, immediately dominating any room he entered. He scanned the room, clearly startled by the presence of so many people. He strode across the length of the room to my mother, putting out his right hand to introduce himself, but stopped short when he saw his daughter's frenzied rocking and realized that beyond my mother were three boys, carrying a half-clad, corpse-like Jill up the stairs at the end of the living room.

Adopting a somewhat prosecutorial stance, Dr. Jovanovich bellowed, "Exactly what is going on here?" He stared at my mother for a response.

The rocking chair stopped abruptly, as Alexis took her feet off the floor, hugged her knees to her chest, and buried her head against her thighs. My mother tilted her head in my direction before saying, "It seems that my daughter was given some drugs at the party."

"What the devil—"

My mother turned her attention back to Kyle, "What kind of drug? What makes you think that she was slipped a drug?"

At this point, Kyle and Pete walked over to the couch where they gently set me down. Kyle said, "Well everything happened suddenly. Jill was fine. They both were. But then they started acting funny. There were a few kids at the party who have a reputation for using drugs, but I've never seen any. There were also some rumors that there might be drugs there. We all agreed beforehand that we weren't going to have anything to do with them. When the girls started getting jumpy, we thought it would be best to leave. You know...to get them someplace safe. We took them to Jack's house in Eastchester to give them some coffee."

"Kyle," my mother said calmly, aware that Dr. Jovanovich was pacing behind her, preparing to launch himself, "This is very important. What kind of drugs? What were the rumors?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Loftus. I heard something about pills. Maybe some downers....maybe acid."

Dr. Jovanovich couldn't contain himself any longer, "Do you mean to tell me that Alexis and this young lady—"

“Jill. Her name is Jill. She’s Alexis’s best friend.”

“That Alexis and Jill may have taken pills? Downers? Acid? What do you mean...acid?”

“LSD, you know—“

“A hallucinogenic? Are you out of your minds?”

“Like I said, Dr. Jovanovich, we think they were slipped to the girls in their drinks.”

“What kind of drinks? Were they drinking alcohol?”

During this exchange, my mother came and sat beside me on the couch. I was weaving in and out of consciousness, but I remember her leaning close to me and putting her hands on my face, turning my head to look at me carefully. Her words were a mere whisper, “What have they done to my baby?” she breathed. “Jill, it’s me. It’s your mother. What is wrong with you?”

I don’t remember what happened next, but I was told that I jumped up from the couch and started gyrating round the room and clawing at my already torn shirt, singing, “I want sex. I want sex. I want sex.”

“This is simply the last straw!” Dr. Jovanovich pronounced. “You boys, I’ll be calling the dean at Fordham Prep to report you. Don’t think for one minute that you’ve heard the last of this. I’m very influential in the Bronx. I am the official historian and founded the Bronx Historical Society in 1955. I’m on the board of the Botanical Gardens. I will get you both expelled from Fordham and everyone else who was involved in this sorry mess!”

I’m told that just as he completed his threat to the boys, my older brother, Geoff arrived home from a date. The last thing he expected was a confrontation with a middle-aged, raging Russian. Geoff had never before met the Russian, but it was clear that the Russian thought he was in charge of the drama unfolding in the living room. The smile on Geoff’s face, residue from his romantic evening, quickly wilted.

“Hi everyone...um...what’s wrong?” He looked from me to my mother to Alexis and finally to Dr. Jovanovich, wishing that he’d stayed out a bit longer.

“Geoff, thank God you’re home,” my mother greeted him. “Jill has taken some sort of drug. Call the doctor and tell him it’s an emergency. Then please go get your father.”

According to what Geoff later told me, he did as he was told and went to awaken my Dad, who was drunk, as usual, and passed out in bed. Given the racket that we were making in the room beneath him, he must have been very well inebriated.

I can picture it exactly. Geoff opening the bedroom door a crack and a stream of light from the hallway spilling over their king-sized bed and my father's bare shoulders.

"Dad," Geoff would have said gently. "Dad." A little louder this time.

"What is it?" my father grumbled, turning in his sleep without opening his eyes.

"You need to get up, Dad. Something happened. Jill took some sort of pill."

My father seemed nominally more awake and looked at Geoff. "Is the doctor here?"

"No Dad. He's on his way."

My father contemplated this for a moment before responding. "Then what do you need me for."

Geoff was aghast. He later told me he thought, "what kind of father are you anyway?" But he only said, "I think Mom needs you, Dad. You have to get up and come downstairs."

As Geoff would speculate later, it was as if my father was missing some essential gene or instinct for parenting, that instinct that told you that sometimes, in the absence of a clear solution to a problem, it was important simply to show up. Simply to be present. Dad was missing that gene.

"Oh alright." He grumbled. "I'll be down in a minute."

But he wasn't down in a minute. He wasn't down in ten. My brother had to make a second trip up the steep flight of stairs to get him, only to find him still asleep in his bed. It would be a long, long night.

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It occurs to me now that my mother cleaned up after me at 15 the same way she had when I was an infant. On this occasion, in the earliest hours of the morning, the dark sky hadn't awakened beyond the narrowest stripes of light along the horizon, it was the sheets and mattress cover I had peed on instead of diapers I had soiled. She tore off the bedclothes and wrangled them fiercely into a tight ball as if her intention was to bruise them, and me, in the process. As she threw a pair of clean pajamas

at me, her fists all but glanced my cheek. I knew a reckoning was coming, but it would be a tongue lashing rather than a fist fight. Even though she had earned it, I wasn't looking forward to sitting through a preachy, one-sided conversation.

When she joined me in the living room she selected "her" chair, a tall, red wingback chair with a camelback shape and rolled arms. Flanked by the front foyer on one side and the fireplace on the other, the chair was positioned next to an antiqued accent table and ladder backed chair. She frequently described her wingback as a "handsome" chair and refused to have it reupholstered in a color that complimented the blue and green scheme of the rest of the room. There it stood like a scarlet sentinel, awaiting its marching orders. With its 90-degree angle and lean cushioning, it wasn't a comfortable chair. It was a chair for teaching good posture or military levels of attention. It was a perfect chair for the occasion.

I took the ladder-backed chair. I didn't dare look at her swollen, bloodshot eyes or tear-stained cheeks for fear that I might see the human being there. The mother who watched her child whirling like a dervish only the night before, hysterical, frenzied, out of control. The mother who watched her child treated by the family doctor when he made the emergency house call. The mother who watched him put his fingers down her daughter's throat and when that failed pumped her stomach of its entire contents. The mother who changed her child's soiled sheets as her child watched from the corner of the room, shaking, shivering, uncomprehending. The mother who couldn't sleep for fear her child might climb out the window and, thinking she was an exotic bird, try to fly. The mother who couldn't understand how all this had happened on her watch.

Instead of looking at her eyes, I studied her scalp, and the crooked part in her hair, running front to back in a mane of tangled Clairol blonde curls, the roots in desperate need of a touch-up. She didn't get many opportunities to look after herself these days. With my father's unemployment and her full-time job as a mother, she had neither the money nor the time for beauty parlors. As I studied her roots, I saw an attractive but run-down woman in her early 40s, who had borne seven children, the fourth of whom had died. As soon as she gave birth to one, she got pregnant with the next. She stopped for a few years after having the sixth. The seventh was a Hail Mary attempt to save her

marriage. It didn't work. Things only got worse after the last was born. She never got out from under the inevitable loads of laundry; the ironing in the days before permanent press; preparation of breakfasts, lunches, and dinners for six kids and two adults; teaching how to tie shoes with rabbit ears; tutoring each on their multiplication tables; chauffeuring to libraries and after school activities; cleaning the house; buying the groceries; entertaining on a regular basis; and attending to other errands. She compared herself relentlessly to the other neighborhood Moms, always scoring herself poorly, always coming up short, wondering how it was that they intuitively knew what rulebook to follow, when she had never even received the book.

Mom placed two mugs of coffee and a bottle of Irish whiskey on the table between us. She poured a generous shot into each. Pushing one of the mugs towards me, she offered me cream and sugar. I thought about how she used to let me sip her Irish coffee at a bar restaurant we frequented as a family during the summer. The place was called Ballards and was famous for inexpensive lobster dinners and its dance floor where at least once a night they played "Do the Funky Chicken" and a polka or two. My mother always wanted to dance and my father never did, so she would dance with us kids, and we would sing and laugh and trip over our feet. Ballards was wide open to the sea and after the sun set, it got chilly. She would enjoy an Irish coffee to warm her and she would let me crawl in her lap and share it with me.

The morning after the LSD, the coffee straightened me out and the whisky made me drunk. The drunker we got, the deeper and more heartfelt the conversation grew. We were close again in a way we hadn't been since 7th grade when we shopped for my dress and shoes for the May Day parade and stopped for a hot fudge sundae before returning home. Or maybe that was the last summer we had been to Ballards. That had been four years ago. Looking back now, I think to myself *only four years?* How much had changed in the four years between 11 and 15. In four years, I had stepped across the threshold between childhood and adolescence, splitting the previously stable earth beneath us and moving my mother and me miles apart. I would have to cross into adulthood before we'd approach closeness again. Still, on that morning, as we swilled our spiked coffees, we managed to forge a brief closeness that allowed meaningful conversation to transpire.

She learned that no, I was not pregnant but yes, sex was much on my mind. She learned that I longed to carve out a different identity for myself. I did not want to be the perennial good girl, a role that had destroyed my popularity in grammar school. I don't know how much she understood or remembered. What I know is that she listened. She listened across the distance that had grown between us, and I thought this might be a new beginning for us, ushering in a new trust and a relationship that allowed me to confide in her once again. For a moment, I was sure she saw me. The real me. And I saw the fleeting recognition in her eyes of a future she once craved for herself. For a moment, it made me feel less lonely for us both.