



ASHLEY LANDE

THE
THING

THAT WOULD MAKE
EVERYTHING

OKAY
FOREVER



TRANSCENDENCE,
PSYCHEDELICS,
& JESUS CHRIST

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*Transcendence, Psychedelics,
and Jesus Christ*

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*The Thing That Would Make Everything Okay Forever:
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“Thorn, you weaponed loveliness,” I called up to her. “If I knew what kind of person could distinguish reality from unreality, I would follow that person to the ends of the galaxy.”

—R. A. Lafferty, *Annals of Klepsis*

Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of the truth listens to me.”

“What is truth?” retorted Pilate.

—*John 18:36–38*

CONTENTS

Prologue	xi
<i>Chapter 1: The First Taste Is Free</i>	1
<i>Chapter 2: Godless Light</i>	21
<i>Chapter 3: Initiation</i>	39
<i>Chapter 4: Glutting the Sensorium</i>	65
<i>Chapter 5: Darkness Risible</i>	85
<i>Chapter 6: Magical Love</i>	115
<i>Chapter 7: We've Got to Get Ourselves Back to the Garden</i>	139
<i>Chapter 8: With Gods Like This, Who Needs Demons?</i>	163
<i>Chapter 9: Through the Valley</i>	191
<i>Chapter 10: It Is Well with My Soul</i>	213
<i>Chapter 11: Tasting the Real Thing</i>	243
Acknowledgments	257
Notes	261

PROLOGUE

◆◆ The last time I ever tripped, I ate mushrooms I'd grown myself.

Like an anxious mother, I fretted over my spore jars, frequently checking the cabinet where they germinated in the secret dark until a web of snowy white began to crystallize against the glass. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw the embryonic fungus proliferating like frost on a window: *my manna*. Mother Nature had provided.

I transferred the star-seeded soil to a Styrofoam cooler over which I hovered, checking every few hours, waiting for just the right time to harvest: when the mushrooms had grown an inch or two, their heads hooded like medieval monks and weaving toward the light on tender stalks, their caps poised to bloom into a gilled umbrella and drop an invisible rain of spores. I spread out my hands and blessed them with my scrambled patois of two-bit Sanskrit and new-age-inflected prayers. “Ommmmm,” I chanted over them, saturating them with the vibration of the Universe.

This would work. *It had to*. It felt as though my very life depended upon it.



For years, psychedelics had been my religion. They were my key to transcendence, my portal to a kaleidoscopic domain that was sometimes a palace of ecstasy. But the drugs didn't work anymore. I couldn't seem to have a good trip. These substances, which I regarded with as much reverence as a Christian might look on the baptismal waters, now unnerved me before I even let the blotter paper turn to pulp on my tongue or sifted the grainy bits of a psilocybin mushroom in my mouth.

I was once sure they had shown me the face of God. But lately they'd shown me nothing but panic, disorder, and disintegration. I wanted to be borne aloft to epiphanic heights and sputtering mania again, like the midnight I'd spent tittupping down the sidewalk of midtown Kansas City pontificating to anyone who'd listen that I myself had become LOVE LIGHT BEAUTY TRUTH WISDOM MAGIC JOY. Or the day my husband and I, newly married after two months of dating and still surfing the heady wave of infatuation, had hiked through the Missouri forests high on acid and the very trees seemed to pour forth speech and the rocks cry out—saying what, I didn't know. But everything, tessellating electrically in high summer glory, whispered of mysteries untold. I hungered to go deeper, further. I yearned for an endpoint, the Thing That Would Make Everything Okay Forever. Psychedelics always seemed to promise a shimmering Shangri-La.

But nowadays, even the counterfeit kingdom evaded me. I was left slumped in the fetid dungeon of my soul, exposed to an infinite cavalcade of gruesome images and stultifying fear.

From the beginning, I'd learned and adopted psychedelia's dogma: psychedelics aren't addictive, we all said, unlike narcotics, which trigger a dopamine flood. Lab rats will press the lever for psychedelics only once, whereas the poor creatures will pound unto death the levers dispensing cocaine or heroin. But I was the outlier, the freak rodent that pressed again and again and again, despite trips that induced unspeakable terror and enduring trauma, desperate for another taste of the rapture that had characterized my earlier experiences. I hit the lever, and I hit it again, drilling it with increasing desperation, and I would keep hitting it until I saw God or lost my mind. I know now what I wouldn't countenance then: I was addicted to psychedelics. *I was a drug addict.*

An addict's brain engages in all manner of acrobatics to justify her idol. Sourcing must be the problem, I concluded. Yes, that made perfect sense. Dealers were all about filthy lucre, but this was my sacrament, my medicine. Plus, I was tired of having to pander to dealers who lorded their power over small tyrannies, casually pretending you hadn't come for what you'd actually come for. I'd spent too many useless kowtowing hours in dimly lit rooms suffused with marijuana smoke and wallpapered with mandala tapestries, a captive audience to Adult Swim reruns and stupid stoner movies. If I could grow my own mushrooms, infusing them with the right energy and love, I reasoned, I'd be back on The Path. My stairway to heaven would spiral high once again.

This wasn't my first attempt at do-it-yourself drugs. Years before, I'd bought a vintage pamphlet with instructions on

synthesizing LSD. I'd barely passed high school chemistry, and that only because Sister Harriet, who ruled with an iron fist and imposed impossibly high standards, had unexpectedly retired three days into my junior year. The replacement teacher was a young woman barely out of college, and the bolder girls in class succeeded in coercing her into lighter assignments and open-book tests. I escaped with a C minus. My bright hopes faded and my palms began to sweat as I leafed through the LSD pamphlet and encountered those dizzying equations again, the chemical ciphers that harried my very literary brain.

Mushroom-growing seemed elementary by contrast, so when my husband got word through friends that some spores might be available, I pounced on the opportunity. As soon as he brought home the syringe of invisible psilocybin spores suspended in water, I took to the task of cultivating them with reverential fervor. I filled the jars with vermiculite. With a dropper, I meted out the spores among them. I screwed the lids on with plastic-gloved hands, exercising a degree of diligence I rarely applied to other tasks. I arranged the jars in a neat row in the cabinet next to our shower—the perfect little climate of dark and humidity. And I waited.



When harvest day arrived, I gathered my fully grown mushrooms and dried them on a screen in the sun. I'd been a good caretaker, I was certain. I'd *adored* them. I'd assured my ticket to ecstasy.

I'd paid the offering, granted the worship due, followed every rule with religious devotion.

We weighed out six grams of dried mushrooms and slid them into a blender with juice. There was a strange gritty earthiness overlaying the citric tartness, like a muddied orange slice. The sour and bitter tang made my mouth water—my body protesting at the toxin entering my digestive tract. As we waited, I placed a Ravi Shankar record on the turntable and sighed as the darting sitar twanged its staccato dance in warm analog, buffered by a galloping tabla rhythm. As the walls remained as static as ever, I began to fret: *Maybe I grew them wrong. Maybe the spores were a bust—maybe they weren't even psilocybin.* But when these questions begin percolating is always, I knew, when it happens.

The room began to change. The walls wavered and breathed, and I inhaled that familiar shift in the air when suddenly the very molecules became sentient, glowing with a consciousness of their own, respirating and crackling with neon electric current. Our model Mayan temple, which my father-in-law had built according to my exacting standards and whose vertical surfaces I'd painted in geometric diamonds, began to shudder and wink. The colors saturated to Day-Glo intensity and flooded down the stairs of the structure in braided streams.

Undulating prismatic lattices overlaid every surface, swooping and diving and swallowing one another only to be continually birthed anew in ever-richer complexity. These mushrooms were *strong*. Oh, they worked all right. But something was wrong—the same thing that had been wrong all the other times, the same

bitter taint of poison that blackened the parade of bad trips I'd endured for the past couple of years. Despite my careful planning, despite my religious observance of The Rules, it was happening again.

As soon as the sumptuous spectacle of color and light assailed my blown-out pupils, a discordant, doom-laden note at the very heart of the cosmos seemed to strike hard and resonant in my gut, shaking everything, destabilizing the entire universe, which now threatened to go spinning off into oblivion. The mushroom was betraying me. The Universe cackled malevolently. I had been brought low, and now I would die, and there was no one to help.

The weight of it all made my body feel heavy. I slowly bent my knees and made the perilous voyage to the floor, which seemed to recede ever farther from me, an Alice whose wonderland had begun to feel alien and hostile.

My body was stone now. I no longer could lift my eyes upward. I turned my face to the floor, hoping for some reprieve in the humbling. But everything everywhere was riotously kinetic. Nothing rested, nothing was silent; the whole world was a whirling, pulsing, dinging, strobing pinball machine. Every whorl in the hardwood floor, every pinpoint of surface collapsed and expanded into infinitely fractalizing visual symphonies, a honeycomb of eyes, a fretwork of maximally intricate geometric patterns.

I lay all the way down, surrendering my body to an earth I prayed would swallow it whole. It was an arduous journey. Impossibly, I summoned the strength to turn my eyes to my

husband, who was lounging on the couch as though the greatest disaster ever to befall the universe was not occurring and everything was totally groovy. I tried hard to stop panicking, but my efforts to calm myself—*breathe, om, remember you are a part of the Universe and the Universe is a part of you*—were like pitching bucketfuls of water onto a blazing sun, where they hissed a dying lisp before vaporizing. My anxiety increased to a buzzing pitch of terror. I was alone in a hostile cosmos. I strained to remember language. My mouth opened and closed in a parched and pathetic pantomime.

“Um, I think I really am dying this time,” I finally said, my words small brittle things against the onslaught of yawning fear, weak bits of Morse code barely traversing the few feet or million miles that separated us.

Who would save me? Where in this roiling decaying mess of a world could a refuge be found? Where was enlightenment, salvation, an *end* to all this chaos? I despaired of the very existence of such a place, or a thing. I didn’t believe anymore that anyone had really overcome the world. The feeble hope I’d once had of attaining some state of nirvana was rendered ludicrous.



“The bigger they are, the harder they fall,” psychologist and psychedelics advocate Timothy Leary once quipped in regard to the “ego death” often associated with psychedelics. But why hadn’t my ego been obliterated once and for all by my routine chemical

excursions, my tri-weekly yoga sessions, my regular sojourns into a sea of blankness through meditation? What would it take? Why wasn't I enlightened yet, and why did the gulf between me and the elusive goal seem to yawn ever wider the harder I tried to breach it? Where was the half-lidded Zen placidity promised by the Buddha statues on my altar? Why did I feel more lost than ever? Why wasn't I *saved*? Was there such a thing? The darkness was too wide, too deep, too big for meditation or yoga or even my psychedelic sojourns—which increasingly landed me in the same Godforsaken place—to be anything besides a vanishing spark in the black. I began to doubt any of it was even so much as that—it all seemed like little more than self-indulgent preening, a frantic and futile dancing to distract myself from the bleeding dark.

"I'm dying," I repeated. My voice was far too weak and unpersuasive to convey the urgency of what was transpiring, but still I persisted: "I'm *dying*," I moaned.

"You're not," he said, calmly.

"Does anything even matter at all?" I asked, my voice cracking with sorrow and fear. I was afraid to close my eyes. I was afraid to keep them open. I was afraid to breathe. I was afraid to stop. Afraid, afraid, afraid. A void yawned in my heart, threatening to eclipse everything I had ever loved, everything I had ever believed was precious. *Does anything matter at all?! Please, let it matter*, my heart cried out to a mute Universe, the wails of an infant for its mother.

“Everything matters,” he answered, nonchalantly, plainly, as though it were the only answer that could possibly exist.

And I began to weep.