

PUTTING OUT THE SUN
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There are two ways to Mount Katahdin. You can begin in Georgia and hike the Appalachian Trail to Maine—that's the long way. The other way is just drive there—that's what I used to do.

Katahdin is thirteen feet shy of a mile and though that's not high it's so far east it's the first place in the country to see sunrise. Runoff from the mountain forms the beginnings of the Penobscot, a river which shares its name with the tribe who lived by the mountain. For them, climbing Katahdin was taboo. The angry storm god, Pamola—part moose, part eagle, part man—had been exiled there by a greater god, Glooskap. And if Pamola was angry with his station, imagine how he would spend that anger on mortals who transgressed his bounds.

I climbed Katahdin first when I was ten and after that a dozen times. Every climb was pretty much perfect. But I have to say, that last climb with Ezra and Frank nearly undid me. Why I climbed it with them I can't say. I believe I knew better. Given the way I was living in those days, that may have been all the reason I needed—I knew better. The good news is I didn't bring Max.

He was not yet four which made me twenty-five and made it the late seventies, basically a non-time, not the sixties, not really anything, just a temporal out-take during which everyone was to wait around and go to seed and wonder when time would resume and what it would hold.

Throughout the seventies, remnants of the sixties had endured but they were dying out fast. As they were about to disappear, LSD made a comeback near the end of the decade. Though it looked like the '60s might recur, it proved to be a collective flashback. Then the Reagans came to office and bought new china for the White House, and after that everyone made fun of the

‘60s.

With his mother's permission, Max and I had left Germany when he was a year and a half. Since then, I'd been a student and had him to support. Actually, the government supported him and he supported me. I remember I got an extra welfare check for a couple hundred dollars. They sent an extra check every year for clothing. Max had plenty of clothes—everyone gave him clothes. They took pity on him what with no mother and a father like me. And though my several shirts were threadbare at the elbows, my pants, frayed at the knees, I decided I'd rather have a good camera for once in my life—especially now with the trip to Katahdin.

I went to one of those rug merchant/camera houses around Times Square and bought a good thirty-five millimeter, single lens reflex. When I got it home and looked it over, I realized they'd slipped me a cheap lens, not at all like the one they had shown me. The thing was plastic. All you had to do was look through it to see the distortion. I called and demanded my money back. They told me to look at the receipt—it said no refunds. They would, however, allow me to trade in my lens plus eighty-five dollars for the one I wanted. On the way there, I dropped Max off with Julia—she was still my ex-girlfriend. Max was happy to be hanging with her. She wasn't his mother, but she was the closest thing he had. His real mother lived in the phone and in pictures.

I stood on the sidewalk outside the store and gave my spiel to everyone who entered: “Before you go in there, could I show you something? Look at the lens these Bozos slipped me. You believe that? You believe that shit? Here I am, I'm paying good money for a camera that's supposedly got a good lens on it, right? And these guys, what do they do? They slip me a lens that distorts everything. I don't need that. I got a camera cause I'm after reality, you know? I'm after reality, not some twisted version of it. This thing doesn't come close. So what I was

wondering is, you think you could maybe stay out of there a while so I can put a little pressure on them?”

It was working. I kept everyone out except this couple who didn't speak English. After fifteen minutes the manager appeared. He was short and rugged. He tried to make his dark eyes flash as he said, “You don't leave now, I call police.”

“Would you do that for me?” I said. “Thank you so much.”

He went back inside. A few minutes later he returned. “You don't leave now, you wish you did.”

“Wonderful. Excellent. Thank you. Then I'll sue. This is great; this is what I live for: an experience.”

Half an hour had gone by and I'd talked like twenty customers away. Finally he came out again, this time with the right lens, and he told me he'd make the trade for twenty-five dollars, that I was getting an incredible deal.

I emptied my pockets and offered him my two ones, a subway token, and change. He took it and as we exchanged lenses he warned me, “You enter my store never again.” I nodded and tried to shake his hand. That really pissed him off. I left, elated.

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Before I could return to the Upper West Side I had to hunt down a bank. While I was at it I took out enough for the trip. We were scheduled to leave the next morning. Ezra and Max and I were hitchhiking up to Belfast, Maine where we'd meet Frank. A couple days later, we would head up past Bangor to Lincoln where Max would stay with my parents and we'd continue north to Mount Katahdin.

As I came above ground at 116th and Broadway, I spotted Eddie outside the gates of

Columbia, where I was a student and he had been too until two years before when he'd graduated from college drugs to heroin and quit going to classes. Just now he was looking anxious. He hadn't shot up in a couple of days and he was a mess.

Over bare feet he wore beat up dress shoes that he must have rescued from a dumpster and his thick wool pants were far too large. A fairly new polo shirt added a surreal touch. His long hair was flying about his face and head like a red halo as he played his guitar and sang about the candy man. You could never tell with Eddie—was he as desperate as he seemed? The residue of a middle class upbringing clung to him, making his heroin-taking, homeless thing seem affected.

Beside him a paper cup held a bit of change and a two dollar bill. A sign promised that he was a drug addict, that none of the proceeds would be used for food or shelter.

He also raised cash through his sales division, namely, a blanket on which lay an iron, a book about the history of accounting, a dog-eared edition of the *New York Review of Books*, a comb, a bong, and a black ceramic toothbrush holder which someone had tried to paint green. With my new camera I took a picture of him sitting cross-legged amid his inventory, strumming his guitar.

Still strumming, he told me he had a great connection to some incredible LSD that would set me free.

Two weeks before, I had foresworn acid. Acid was the reason Julia had left me. Quitting appeared the only way to get her back. I hadn't told her my plan. I figured I'd go a month without it and surprise her. But it occurred to me now that acid wasn't really a problem. Not in and of itself. It was only a problem for Julia. Here I was taking acid for what I considered to be spiritual reasons, searching for the experience that would transform me in a moment from

asshole to saint, and she didn't think it was working. From what she was saying, it amplified the asshole and obliterated the saint. But it didn't feel that way to me. Hell, I'd seen things on acid I'd never seen before—things about myself and friends and life in general. I told Julia this. She said I was fooling myself.

She encouraged me to talk to our friend Joe about meditating. He was a former acid head who had discovered Zen, and now he claimed meditating would bring you to the same place as acid, but gently. I wasn't sure I wanted gently. I wanted the heavens to burst open and a beam of solid light to come down and strike me between the eyes and knock me unconscious.

But I'd tried meditating. Joe had patiently shown me how. He took me to the Zendo. Not that it did any good—I still hadn't had anything approaching an acid moment on Zen. When I asked him about it, he said it would take time. Reluctantly I'd decided to stop the acid and give this meditation a serious try. I desperately wanted Julia back.

But now Eddie was making this offer. It got me thinking about the climb up Katahdin. Can you imagine, I said to myself, climbing Katahdin on acid? Here I've been climbing the thing since I was 10, and I've had hundreds of experiences up there with my family and to do it now on acid, can you imagine? Besides, if I do it on Katahdin, Julia'll never find out. And it's not like I made promises to her—the only person I promised was myself.

Eddie brought his guitar and the money from his cup; everything else he left on the blanket. We went to his friend's room in East Campus where I bought twelve hits of acid for twenty-four bucks.

After getting paid his share, Eddie started telling me he knew I'd already done him a favor by buying the acid, but he'd done me a favor too by making the connection. The way he saw it we were even. Now he wondered if I could do him a real favor—he asked the same of the

other guy. He needed just six more bucks and he was wondering would we give him three each.

“I’m not going to lie to you like other junkies do,” he said. “I need a fucking fix. Now can you guys help me out or what? Otherwise I’ll have to go out there and beg on the street.”

I said “Okay, Eddie.” With the acid in hand I didn’t feel quite right telling him to just say no. We gave him the money and Eddie hugged us both at the door. He whimpered something about gratitude, then we left and he walked very quickly.

I’d never seen anyone score heroin, so I decided to go with him—it seemed sort of educational. We headed down toward Columbus Ave. and a Hundred Seventh. On the way Eddie asked if he could do a hit of my acid and I said sure and I told him, “Damn, Eddie you know how to work a deal to death.”

I ripped off one of the stamps and gave it to him. As he was about to put it into his mouth, I told him I wanted to get a picture of the little square on his tongue. “Hold your tongue out just like that. Right. Just like that. Right. That’s it. Incredible. Great. One more. One more. That’s it. Perfect. I got it.”

Seeing the acid on his tongue, it occurred to me that I had no plans except departing the next morning. I decided I’d take a hit as well.

But what about Julia?

As long as I only took one hit, she’d never know. I just had to remember to act normal.

* * *

Eddie wondered if he could shoot up at my place. I said sure, but he couldn’t sleep over because I was leaving the next morning and, “You know, Eddie, gee wiz. I mean, shit, man, you always stay a fucking week.”

“I know, Nate. You’re right...what can I say!”

He went into the bathroom because by now Julia'd brought Max home. Max ran up to me and asked when we were leaving. He was excited that he'd be seeing his grandparents and that we were hitchhiking all the way. The acid was burning through me by now. As I looked at Max, it felt like I'd never really seen him before—like I'd never seen anything for that matter. He looked like an angel with his blond bangs as I held him up to my face. He looked so alive—I could see the blood flowing through his lips and his eyelids—and I could tell how much I loved him and felt assured that he loved me.

I kissed Julia and told her how much I loved her, how much I loved her lips and I told her that she was part of my flesh because she was part of the moment just like the color of her dress and the sound of the neighbor's radio were part of the moment, and all of the moment was part of my flesh because in taking it in through my senses, it literally became part of my body.

"Are you high?" she asked.

Everything was flashing mythic now—the month old fight between us no longer seemed between us per se. It was between Woman and Man. We were mere franchise holders of our respective sexes and it was our sexes fighting—it had little to do with us.

"I was hoping we could talk," she said.

"Well, damn," I said. "Let's talk then."

"I can't talk to you when you're like this."

I was pretty sure she thought I'd only smoked weed. She'd be especially pissed to find it was acid.

Max had to go to the bathroom, but that's where Eddie was. I told him to be patient. Soon he was grabbing his crotch and running in circles—it was partly for real, but partly to entertain me, which it did. I kept taking pictures of him dancing. Finally I told him to go knock on the

door. A couple minutes later he returned. “He doesn’t answer.”

I went down and knocked. Max was right—no answer. I knocked again. Nothing. After several more knocks Eddie grunted. I could hear him stumbling around in there. I yelled to him that Max had to go to the bathroom bad.

Eddie came to the door, walking and taking a nap at the same time. The wall guided him to the couch and he lay on it. When Julia saw this, she pulled me back to the bathroom.

The place was a mess. The hamper was on its side and towels lined the tub. Kenny had made himself comfortable as he’d shot up.

“Is he sleeping here tonight?” she asked. “Because if he is, I’m not.”

“Oh, are you sleeping here, Babe?”

“You don’t want me to, do you!” she said.

“Of course I do.”

“That’s okay; forget it. I just thought it would be nice before you go away.”

“No, it’s a great idea,” I said. “Really. Seriously. Stay.”

“But not if Eddie’s here,” she said.

“Don’t worry; I already told him he’s gotta leave.”

“Nate,” Eddie booms from the couch. I predict he’ll ask to stay. I want Julia to know I mean business. I encourage her to follow me to the living room for proof.

“What do you want, Eddie,” I ask.

He doesn’t answer—he’s dozing. Suddenly he’s back and he repeats my name. He must think I’m still in the bathroom because he’s really booming.

“Nate!”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, there you are. Listen, I don’t think this is acid.”

Shit. If I play my cards right, Julia won’t know I’ve taken it too. I go with non-committal.

“Oh yeah?”

“Are you feeling anything?” he wonders.

I look back at Julia who now points at me and nods questioningly.

I play dumb. I say, “What?”

She mouths, “You?”

“What?” I say.

She knows I won’t lie to her so when I don’t answer she knows. She sucks her tongue and shakes her head. She’s nearly crying.

“It was only one hit,” I tell her.

* * *

Max had his paint set out on the floor and the cat and I were watching him paint. I was taking pictures. Eddie was lying on his back on the couch with his forearm covering his eyes. Every now and then he’d moan and Max would look over at him then smile at me. The fourth or fifth time this happened, Max crept over to me and wondered whisperingly if Eddie was asleep.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Are you asleep, Eddie?”

“No. You want me to leave?”

I wanted to say yes, but I heard myself say, “Not yet.”

I felt bad sending Eddie out into the world in this state. If he had another hour or two, his grogginess would wear off and he’d be fine.

Julia was out in the kitchen, apparently cooking dinner. I motioned for her to follow me to the bathroom. “You mind if Eddie eats with us. I don’t think he has any money left.” I was

aware of dozens of muscles in my face as I spoke, and they were moving on their own and I could feel them expressing something foreign, the deepest part of me.

“What, he spent it on heroin?” I could see the muscles moving in her face too.

“Yeah, I think so,” I said.

“Why do you encourage him.”

“I don’t encourage him.”

“Of course you do. You give him money. You buy drugs from him. You invite him over.” Did she know her face looked angry? What did mine look like?

“Eddie’s going to do heroin whether I invite him over or not,” I said.

“Yeah, well you don’t have to make it so easy for him.”

I realized now that there was nothing between our faces except naked space and air. She was right there. I wanted to kiss her and promise her everything would be fine. She looked too angry.

“Well do you mind if he stays for dinner?” I asked.

“It’s your apartment. Don’t ask me.”

“Well, you know what I mean. You’re out there cooking.”

“I don’t care. You want him to stay, let him stay.”

She returned to the kitchen and I stepped over to the mirror. My face looked serious. I stared at my eyes and there came a moment when it felt like each eye locked onto its counterpart and I could look deep within myself feeling all the while a vibration that I would have sworn was a low-grade electric shock like when you stick your tongue on the terminals of a nine volt battery. I now tried to see my entire face at once and it was shifting moment to moment from one look to another, drifting in subtle ways, but drifting just the same. Try though I might, I could not

stop it from drifting, from flowing, from never being the same face twice.

And then all of a sudden I was peeing. I didn't remember turning toward the toilet, zipping down my fly, or anything. I was just standing there watching the stream of urine and picturing the way it connected me directly to the water in the bowl, which was connected by pipes and mains to the Hudson River which flowed to the sea. And I pictured the thousands of other rivers flowing to the sea, rivers connected to tens of thousands of sewer systems, to hundreds of millions of toilets. Around the world millions were peeing at that very moment, a network of millions connected by our urethras, which were connected to our blood streams, connected to our brains. Clearly more was being passed than urine.

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When we sat to eat, Eddie said he wasn't hungry. He guessed he'd be going. As he was leaving, he got me over by the door and said, "Nate, I know you've outdone yourself today. But I was wondering—you think you could maybe spare a five spot till next week?"

"Eddie, I need my money for the trip." Then I thought about how he was going out there to face the world with nothing to protect him but his clothes. I said, "How 'bout I give it to you in food stamps, Eddie?"

"Hey, that would be great, Nate, really."

I got out a five dollar stamp and he hugged me and told me I was a righteous man and I thanked him and he left.

After sitting, I realized I didn't feel like eating either. But I did feel like talking, and this I did. I sat with Max and Julia and talked about how the pasta they were eating came from wheat grown in some farmer's field hundreds, maybe thousands of miles away, and they, in eating it, were long-distance grazing, like eating over the phone or something. And I described for them

what it looked like when they ate. Max agreed with me that it looked like magic that you could put food in your mouth and make it disappear. Julia wouldn't say if she agreed or not.

She got up and went over and lay on the couch. I stayed with Max while he finished his meal. He told me proudly that no one else in his day care center had ever hitchhiked. I told him I'd never hitchhiked when I was his age either, that he was being brought up differently from the way I'd been. I admitted it sometimes scared me, it was so different. "Because when I was your age, I don't know—we went to church and everything, and my father had a car, and... I don't know, everything was different."

He said, "It's okay Papa. We don't need a car, 'cause we can hitchhike."