

Sarah Ruth Jacobs

### Drug Chronologies

I'm in the dark cool garage of Dillon's mom's house in Capehart, a welfare community of cookie cutter homes where everything, even the sunlight, is unnatural. We're having trouble scoring acid and Heather, 17, is hunched over on the torn-up couch, her short black hair falling over her plump pale face. She is throwing a fit.

"Chill, Heather, we're trying to get some," one of the guys says.

"I fucking need it," she says, her face piggish, slow colorless tears moving down her cheeks. The guys in the garage are alarmed, are telling her to quiet down, but her fingers are like claws on her legs; she's freaking for her fix.

People say that acid isn't addictive. Those people never met Heather. Rumor had it she did ten tabs the first time she tripped, and most people said she never fully touched ground again.

Heather would have been better off staying on that couch forever, her babyish face contorted, sobbing. Sometimes I'm almost comforted to think that Heather may have left her better self behind, parts of her psyche burning off, her mind one long trail.

I can't tell you how I first met Heather. Memories of that time bleed into one another, are only salvageable in brief episodes. I met Heather when I was 15 and riding in a stranger's car, smoking a harsh cigarette, listening to *Paint It Black* on blasted speakers, cruising through springtime in Maine. We got out to meet Heather on the street with Dillon around midday on a warm sunny Friday. They were both dressed in full goth regalia, and I was convinced they were siblings and lovers. This is small town Maine, where the local sex shop was burned to the ground for indecency. Heather was an act of defiance, walking around wherever and whenever, dressed in black, gother than goth, beyond care. Stories followed her. Heather was a nymphomaniac. Heather was a lesbian. Heather was always waking out of some cracked-out fairy tale and we didn't have a better reality to offer. I think I loved her from the first time we met.

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I'm 14 and it's Friday in Capehart so we're going to do acid. This is my first time and it's already dark outside and the garage is only half-lit by a stand-up light. My tab comes out of a plastic baggie and after I take it my ex-boyfriend James, 16, tells me to lick my palm where I was holding it. When I don't he takes my hand and I feel his slimy deer tongue there.

James was my first kiss but he was only going out with me to forget his other girlfriend, and one day I found where he had written to god to save her in circles in his notebook. James was probably the most beautiful of all of us, clothes draggling, a perfect mole on one side of his jaw, dark skin and skinny as death, his hair in graceful clumps of filth. He had gotten on his knees in his baggy, draggling pants to ask me to be his girlfriend. I think that was the day we met.

But now I'm tripping and I want to run away from it all, I want to hide and ambush the world. I bend license plates, climb a tree, stare down the moon, and piss myself on purpose; the grass gleams in the night, artificial

as Easter. There's a playground out in the middle of all of the identical homes, and Heather and I swing as she tells me about Orange Juice Boy.

“He took two hits of acid, and decided to pour himself a glass of orange juice. Pretty soon he got convinced that *he* was the orange juice, and whoever came around couldn't tell him any different. To this day you can visit him in a mental hospital.” She gently kicks her feet out on the swing, but she isn't really moving. Her face is moony but when she smiles it's like she's on top of a sky-high Ferris wheel.

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The summer after that I stole a bag of my mom's Moroccan weed, brought it like a trophy to the porch of the house we were skulking. Brandon, an adorably fucked young man, took one hit and flopped to the porch floor, lost to the world.

Sitting on the steps of that porch that summer, Heather told me once about why she was so screwed up.

“When I was twelve a group of men all got together and raped me...there was a lot of them. I was crying and saying for them to stop.”

She was sitting above me on the steps. She recited the story carefully, as though it happened to someone else and she had only gleaned it secondhand. She was looking down at the cracks in the porch wood, and she was perfect.

“They did it to me in a way that the doctor said I might not be able to have kids.”

Of course I hugged Heather, I told her I loved her, but no one could change something like that. Love is only another burden. I wonder when it was that I first realized there was no saving Heather.

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On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July that summer I had the idea of burning an American flag in the street. We lit the cheap thing up and had a small parade, whooping down the vacant avenue, the flag licked by fire and night. In the morning, hungover, I stumbled over charred bits of old glory on the porch. So many mornings I would confront the face of Bangor, Maine, a town that can't seem to pull itself together, that had been rebuilt from flood and flame. I would stay up all night and dawn streets would greet me as I stumbled home, the light as sourceless as fog.

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Then I met Malachi. I had heard of him long before I saw him in person. People said he was a mean motherfucker, that he kept two Labradors in his basement, starving and torturing them. One day when Heather and I were in the town square, she seemed shaken.

“Malachi burnt my leg when I was passed out. I didn't feel anything, but it's real ugly.” She pulled back her skirt and on the pale insides of her thighs there were glistening burns from where Malachi had pressed an iron. Heather herself seemed nearly indifferent to her wounds.

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The night I met him it was in the first dregs of winter, the streets empty, snow deep and still sifting, so cars were rare. A bunch of us were crammed into a tiny apartment ten minutes' walk from my house. Inside, Heather told me about the time she had done Dramamine to hallucinate. She had seen an entire town in miniature on the wall, and she had spent most of the night chasing around a magician and his crow.

After Dramamine, Heather mentioned the whole cough syrup trick. I hadn't heard of that either, and I offered to take a short walk through the snow to the supermarket and steal a bottle for her. The kids all told me that the heavy cough formula worked best. It was miserable and windy outside, practically a blizzard with snow in five

foot drifts. At the supermarket it took me forever to steal a bottle or even get the courage up to go to the pharmacy section. Someone saw me slipping the box inside my jacket but he remained quiet.

Back at the apartment, Heather plugged her nose and chugged the whole bottle of orange glop. Soon, she was more or less catatonic. Her words would come from a very long distance away, and her eyes were glassy. I felt lousy for enabling her, and I vowed to babysit her the whole night.

Less than an hour after she went into the daze the landlord came up the stairs, and everyone hid from him. He announced that he was evicting them and that everyone had to leave or he would call the cops.

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Some of us were driven by the cold into going to Malachi's. I remembered what he did to Heather's thighs, but there seemed to be no choice, and I thought things would be okay if we were in a group and I watched over her. Heather was still robotripping and didn't seem to be able to get out of her rabbit hole. When we got there it was pretty late, and everyone seemed committed to staying over. His apartment was a boy palace, his floor littered with video games, crappy posters covering every surface. Malachi was in his mid-20s, he was blond and blue-eyed, ruggedly handsome with a slightly wiry build. He kept his hair in a Mohawk which he would dye different colors.

"Who's your girlfriend?" he asked Heather, referring to me.

"Shut up, you leave her alone," she said dopily.

"Heather has really great tits," he said, addressing me. "Don't you think?"

"Sure," I said.

"Yeah, too bad the rest of her is so ugly."

His eyes were everywhere, crazed. He could feel everything. Months later I saw him on the street from inside a car and as we passed his head turned, his bullet eyes matching my gaze.

“How about this?” he started. “When the world ends, you can be in my harem.”

I thought him slightly mad and slightly intriguing as he continued to babble about how he knew many languages, how he was a genius who had been sent to college as a boy, how he had outwitted the professors. He told me how he could kill anyone. He was spry and boyish, and his apartment was his kingdom, everyone in it his servants. He referred to a girl who would clean for him as his footstool.

Soon he was sitting next to me. Heather was miles away, and I could barely see the other people in the room. I think they were playing video games or zoned out. He held a Rubix pyramid. I could feel his heat next to me. I was wary and yet found him attractive. His zeal was in everything. He made what he said true, like how Christmas is something you feel, not just tinsel and stale peppermint, something that emanates like a fever.

He twisted the shape in his hands. “See, if you want to move this piece there, you have to do this, just three twists.” The piece moves. He shows me again.

“Okay, here, so move that there.”

I take the pyramid and I twist it like he showed me.

“That’s good, you got it.” Suddenly I was in his strange club; maybe slightly better than his harem. His eyes were so blue; I was drowning.

“There’s something about you. I feel like I want to protect you,” he said.

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Somehow I knew I should get Heather out of there, especially in her state, so I took her and left. Everything about her was slow, and we shuffled through the December night, moving at zero miles an hour.

“Where are we?” she kept on asking, and she was so puzzled that it could have been another country that we were cutting through.

We knocked on many doors but none would have us. The warm doorways would close and Heather would be left staring blankly.

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One day the following spring I was at the square and I realized that our group was dissolving. The mother who owned the house that we most frequented was moving. Our nights of sitting on the picnic table taking hot chocolate bong hits were over. Everyone dropped out of school, joined the army, stopped coming to the town square, or in some other way disappeared from sight.

I had always been on the outside of the circle because everyone else went to public school and my mother had insisted I go to private. My school had a dress code, was called prep, and I hated everyone there, almost on principal. Truly, I was on the outside of both groups, and I didn't feel entirely at home with either. My mother had had me at 45 and she had never married, and therefore she had never felt comfortable socializing with the other married parents—she couldn't relate, and therefore I was shut out from most social circles from an early age. I wasn't allowed to invite kids over to my house because my mother was a landlady who rented out all of our rooms to tenants, and she was a hoarder so there were no common rooms where we could hang out. By the time I got to the private high school, I resented all of the normal, well-to-do kids.

There was one or two worthwhile teachers at my high school. One of them quit halfway into the semester. The other one once came up to me, too close for comfort, and asserted "You're beautiful, do you know that?" I felt like I had been spit on.

There might have been one or two bad apples in the peck of preps at my school, but they sure had dull ways of rotting. When I met Heather and the other public school kids I felt like I'd come home.

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One day, nearly a year and a half after the group had split up, my mom and I were at McDonalds. It was a few weeks before my senior year of high school and we were arguing about where I should apply to college. I was ignoring her and looking at a newspaper. There was a short article near the bottom of the front page. It stated that Heather and Malachi had been arrested for possessing a gun, mushrooms, marijuana, and over \$10,000 in cash. I was shocked that I had gotten so estranged from these people that now they were news to me. I hadn't even heard that they were a couple, and that piece of news struck me as terribly wrong. I told my mom that these were people I knew. Our policy had always been don't ask don't tell. She knew very few of my friends, and in return for a ridiculously late curfew I was expected to pull strong grades.

She looked at me, her sad old eyes doing the martyr bit. "That's really dangerous, that they had a gun," she said. She was looking at me in that filthy McDonald's light as though I was stillborn at 17.

A few weeks later, we flipped a penny over the living room rug to decide whether I would apply to Cornell or not. My mom won. Cornell was the only university that accepted me, I think because I applied early decision and my mother ensured that I met with local alumni for an interview. The couple who met me had met at Cornell and were benign, plump, had what appeared to be a lax life.

"Cornell's main social scene is frat parties," the man told me. "Have you considered joining a sorority?"

Later, when they spoke to my mom over the phone, the couple said that they had known just seeing me that I was a Cornell girl.

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Since my high school was a prep school it had a Sociology class taught by a wasted looking red-haired woman who seemed to think that the key to knowledge was in memorizing answers by rote.

For our one and only field trip our class went to the district courthouse. I had never been there, though my mother often went to evict people from rooms in our house, or in the case of one tenant who went too far, to get a restraining order.

Just entering the building I had the sense that I had done something wrong. Maybe it was the still hazy memory of the time I had been questioned by police, their cruisers flashing, while I was tripping on acid.

My class passed through a metal detector and then quietly stepped into a court hearing that was already in progress. The defendant was Malachi, his Mohawk shaved, his body encased in a suit. Heather was also there to testify. We all got copies of the court document. It was a hearing to discern whether the police had followed the correct protocol in busting down the door of Malachi's apartment, a lair studded with nearly 20 knives stuck in the furniture.

My class watched hungrily. Two worlds had collided, and my friends were on trial. All of my classmates' faces were frozen in fascination, and they were staring at Malachi and Heather as though they were bugs under a glass. In a way, I suppose that's what they were. They had been removed from their natural habitat, exposed to the deadly court process. I had thought so highly of both of them, at least in terms of fear or respect, but even I felt skeptical as I listened to Malachi explain how the cops had unnecessarily busted down his door. He was trying to sound expert but even I knew he was a dead duck.

The cheap defense lawyer strutted back and forth. "What level of education have you completed?" he asked Malachi.

"Eighth grade."

I was furious that they were being degraded, that their own lawyer's tactic was to make them look stupid. Maybe they were even buying into it. My stomach was a sick knot.

Heather on the stand, chewing gum, nonchalant as ever.

“What level of education have you completed?”

“Tenth grade,” she said.

It still hadn’t really sunk in for me that they were a couple. The whole scenario was wrong.

Heather and Malachi must have seen the well-dressed prep students gawking at them, but I don’t think they recognized me. I thought about yelling out Heather’s name, but somehow I didn’t want her to know that I was a part of the group, or to know that I had seen her subjected to such questions.

On the way back to class, the other students were making fun of Heather and Malachi, talking about how dumb they sounded. Erin, an especially chicken-thin, obnoxious smartass who often bullied me, was imitating Heather’s voice. I hoped they never know how ignorant they were—they don’t even deserve that knowledge. As an activity during the next class, the teacher handed us bits of paper with questions about the hearing, mainly the legal issues, and my stomach felt so wrong. The girl I loved had been turned into a class assignment, into questions that allowed three inches of blank space for an answer. I can never forgive them for that.

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Right around graduation I was walking down the bright spring streets when I saw Heather. She was fatter and somehow cheerful. She was chewing tobacco, hawking brown bug juice onto the street.

“Ross and I are getting married so we can have conjugal visits,” she told me. “I go see him in jail. He’s going to have to go to federal prison.”

To me, she seemed like an entirely different person, like there was something missing, her words simpler. I hope to God she was already gone.

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I went off to college and a part of me always looked up to Heather, just for her courage, her recklessness, the way that she didn't care what the world thought. I treasured our time together and looked back on it as a time of innocent experimentation. There was no bad blood in the group, and I knew that otherwise my high school experience would have been misery. I never stayed in touch with them, and still don't know where the boy I lost my virginity to is. Maybe part of it was that I didn't want to know. I wanted my memories to stay safe.

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The day the radio spoke death, time was out of season. I was back home during senior year of college for one break or another, though I have no recollection of traveling to get there. I was in my old room which my mother had held back from renting for the prior few weeks. I was getting ready to do something. Something. I was sitting. Or I was about to get up. Or I was floating at the ceiling of the room. The sun was bright, trying to shine through the winter. The air was thin and chill.

“A new development today in the court case for the murder of Heather—” and the radio announcer blurted out her full name almost cheerfully. I heard Malachi's last name. It wasn't my life then. I was a rag doll that had grown up in a box, and the other rag dolls had names and relationships but that all disappeared at night. I guessed maybe someone hadn't put us away right the night before. I stopped.

I will say what the newspapers say. Heather was murdered by her husband, Malachi. She was last seen through a surveillance camera, walking through the aisles of a supermarket with Malachi and hugely pregnant. Less than a day later he attacked Heather in their trailer home. He took a knife to her and she became something else. She was stabbed “at least” 47 times, many of those times in the head and stomach. He covered her head with a bag. Someone who studied murder scenes said that the stabbing pattern showed that the killer had intense feelings about his victim, and the fact that she was covered signifies his regret. Rumor had it he hadn't wanted the baby.

He left her there for the weekend, he spent the savings they had put together for the baby.

Monday he confessed.

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The distance was what killed me. I had loved her as much as anyone and yet she had been dead for almost a year before I found out. One might think that that distance was somehow a comfort, that I could console myself with the fact that I could have done nothing. But I would trade that horrible powerlessness for anything. She was gone before I knew it.

Ritualistically, for four months following my discovery, I played her murder over and over in my head. I tried to get close to her in death, to understand what that was, what she had felt. It was all I could think about. I read the newspaper details as though they were secrets imparted by the dead. I became the killer and the victim, playing things over and over in my mind, anything to escape that distance.

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Six years prior to the murder, my junior year of high school, New Year's Eve 1998. We're all gathered at the latest apartment on a street with a bad reputation. It's maybe two months before our group could be said to have officially broken up. There's a huge VHS camcorder being passed around. Someone videotapes me, my eyes burnt out and red.

"You'll never be able to work in government now," someone says to me. The knowledge of my future dawns on me for what feels like the first time.

Heather's sitting against a wall of the room, her head between her legs, now and then making a slow moan.

"Don't bother her, she's having flashbacks," someone says.

I get dared to make out with this curly-haired stoner boy in front of everyone, and I oblige, getting on his lap, his baggy pants making him bigger than Santa. Our mouths are so dry, our kisses expanding into the endless darkness of our throats.

Later that night I wander over and sit next to Heather. She's half closing her eyes, trying to concentrate.

"I just had a vision," she says. "There was this woman sitting under a big fruit tree. She spoke to me. I have to draw it."

Heather gets a thin piece of paper, and she starts to sketch the scene, but it is already gone. She looks at the paper dumbly, and I can feel a trace of what it was she saw, something older than parchment and rich as earth, a secret that is lost between us.