

Tides of Terre Haute

Parts of Terre Haute were some of the worst in Indiana. Neighborhoods with land-borne sharks looking for iPhones and jewelry and sometimes, if you weren't careful, a little blood. Dangerous places at night. I preferred to stay in my room, daydreaming over posters of beachside vistas, plus restaurants and bars more crowded than a *Where's Waldo?* picture. Mom and Dad promised to bring me there one day. France, apparently. But that was before they went away.

Things changed after. I moved to a new home that looked like an oil drum rusted with holes in the ceiling. Great-uncle Peter the preacher's place. Preacher Pete took me like a tenant late on rent. Lots of keep it down even though I had nothing to make noise with. What a thing to say to an eleven-year-old girl with nobody to talk to.

I agreed to see Mom and Dad under the condition I wasn't asked to smuggle, which I was and did. I had to make separate trips on account of the different penitentiaries. Prison was the first time I'd ever dealt with them one-on-one, my parents being inseparable when not locked up. Their love for each other was the only thing to take seriously.

"When can you come back?" Mom asked. A fluorescent light flickered in the boxy visitor's room where we sat.

"Whenever the schedule says."

"I need you here before the lunar eclipse," she said, steamrolling the always-on way she did. "Your dad visited me in a dream last night. He said just the same, to have you come soon as you can. You're delivering deliverance. Get it?" A bell sounded. We were done for the day except for the goodbye or thank you or keep out of trouble or maybe even I'm sorry. She frowned. "You smell like hot trash."

For things to be clean, there needs to be someone to clean them. Mom spent years scrubbing down the counters in our trailer until they chipped, plastic veneer stripped by force of detrition. Did it to maintain the spiritual sanctity of our space, apparently. Once or twice I put my food down after and tasted bleach. Clean isn't always better.

The idea was to rid the world of insects. She hated them, Mom, never more enlightened than when burning repellent candles, bug spray fired into the atmosphere of every room, closet, especially cupboards that pooled with it so bad you started to wonder about yourself. The cicadas she hated most. The way they clung with hooks to her clothes, chirping, goading she called it. Dad said the unique blend of pesticides used on crops gave them a demonic supercharge. Said even wilder things about the magic mushrooms he and Mom got arrested for.

Prison didn't slow sales. Mom kept pushing and I was the good supply. I guess inmates made for solid customers. Guards too. She traded an eighth for roach traps on her first night.

"We're running low," I told her after a few weeks. This set off a casual wave as if not important, a common move of hers and the one I hated most.

"Keep planting the vineyard," she said, a misnomer for the grow-house hidden in a cut of woods behind where Preacher Pete lived. "We got joy left to spread." Joy offered to those who hadn't read the news lately. Joy without mentioning the guaranteed hospital trip. I said okay see you next time. Heading to the bus, I picked a cicada off my arm on the way out.

Cicadas survive by means of predator satiation, or overwhelming the things that hunt them buffet-style. The idea is you're less likely to get eaten if there are a thousand of you than just one. I learned it from a *National Geographic* Pete left behind after a visit to my futon about the possibility of rent, which for a kid with no job is a short conversation. Mom hated them worst of all, the cicadas, but never had any luck getting rid. They were like her, real casual in their way, but different being less destructible since a single dead cicada made no difference when a swarm of others were chirping you louder than Lucas Oil Stadium. There was only one version of Mom. I think she was more aware of that than any person should be, always talking about needing more hands or another brain to think with. Everything was a volume play with her. Funny, since she had no love for community. Dad neither, my parents having turned their backs on most everyone since I could remember. It's harder to act badly in front of people you know.

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We were aware of course. It wasn't like my parents forgot to try the mushrooms before selling them. Dad said not to worry, that people needed to change how they saw things anyway. We were doing a public service. He preferred to lie loudly as if to shout the truth out of earshot,

my father a man above it all. Even though he was fully aware, technically, that we were peddling poison. Mom didn't care. Just laughed.

Dad was right that the mushrooms changed how people saw things, but wrong about their need for it. Hallucinogenics laced with salvia and white powders I didn't ask about. A no joke recipe. Everything brewed and bagged to make you see the unseeable like music and love and relatives long dead; manna from heaven, Dad said, for anyone interested in rolling the dice. Which was plenty of folks at first.

But then stories started cropping up all over town. Stuff about customers passing out, not breathing. Final straw was a van of college kids driving to Lake Michigan on spring break needing evacuation by helicopter after buying and trying at the local Exxon. They should've known not to clear an ounce in one sitting but I still felt bad. Lured to the sea by mermaids, they said. In Terre Haute.

The incident made local news. Messy in the Indianapolis Star. Reporters gave interviews to everyone all the way down to Preacher Pete, who said he knew us to be heathens as if he wasn't in on it. In court the college kids testified to drowning, and not just visually — like the real thing, rinsed by liquid in the lungs. Where's the Indiana Ocean, I ask?

There were plenty more stories though. After hearing them all, I was surprised my parents only got eight years. Mom breathed like she was coming up for air when the verdict dropped. You might have thought she had been out there herself, swimming for songs under imaginary water with the other fools.

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I got a job delivering food after moving in with Preacher Pete. The pay was bad but better than not having any which up to that point had been my only relationship with money, Mom and

Dad twisting shut whenever the subject of allowance came up. It was hard to find someone to hire me because no one trusted an eleven-year-old, leaving Sun Mart & Food as the only option for employment, a place I typically avoided given its reputation for rank meat. No problem, don't eat it. Just bike it from A to B. I stunk worse than a slurry pit, clothes, hair, all of it. Most days I was the expired meat.

School got left behind. Probably for the best. Kids asked me for a hookup on the regular, many times not asking, threats of this and that once word got out I caved easy. So it was no surprise when a customer paused one day after I handed them their groceries and said, "Hold up, aren't you the shrooms girl?" and before I could say no, shoved more money in my face than I saw in a week. Nowhere smaller than Terre Haute.

Selling mushrooms was new for me. I tried to keep my hands clean beside the smuggling to Mom, but things had changed. Pete lived to warn me about biblical floods and late rent all in the same breath, the implication they were attached impossible to ignore. My grocery job wouldn't keep me afloat much longer. I needed real money and with no other family existing that I knew of foster care seemed likelier by the day. This uncomplicated the issue of pushing toxic meat, so why not drugs? I wasn't much for morality anyway. Self-preservation more like.

"Do they really work?" the man asked through a crack in the door, eyes wrinkled under a chain lock.

"Stories are true."

Partly hoped to put the guy off. But people know the routine with things of the bad-for-you variety. Doesn't stop them. I could have railed from the highest hill against my own merchandise and it wouldn't have mattered. Might as well keep a roof over my head. The guy bought a quarter-ounce and tipped like I was DoorDash.

Pushing became my entire life. Before, my grades were good. I played point guard on the sixth-grade basketball team, guitar badly. There wasn't much about me that raised eyebrows other than the legally obligated company I kept, my parents, who were at the top of the list of people who shouldn't have a child. Always acting terribly, not even so much abusive or addicted. They were just too loose with everything, which is its own brand of stupid when you see it up close as long as I had. The kind of people who lived by astrological signs and religious ecstasies forecasted by the say-so of Pete. They didn't care about me. Only each other. And maybe money. Though even that I'm not so sure about since we never seemed to have any.

Started off fine for the most part. And then the only thing happened that could: I got robbed. Other than arrested, there's no different way drug dealing turns out. Good news was I didn't get knifed or shot. Just beat to hell. Frozen bag of peas on each eye and a dead-leg. I lost \$535 and a few baggies. My bike too. Congratulations to the guy who kicked my ass wearing a K95 with pink flamingos on it, which worked since I doubt I could have picked him out of a lineup after. As if I could call the cops anyway.

Worst part was I lost my job at Sun Mart since the bike was company property. So it was back to having nothing. Less than nothing since I was in the hole for whatever got jacked.

I saw lots of cicadas between Preacher Pete's and the prisons. Why he hadn't offered to drive me before was a mystery but there we were, me and him, staring through the windshield of his Dodge Dakota to the tune of rehashed details doled and dusted. As if complaining was going to make Mom and Dad's sentences go by faster. I tried to change the subject by calling out a cicada on the sideview mirror but Pete just rolled down his window and crushed the thing. Wiped the guts on his dog collar after. I'd never been so glad to get to a state pen. Might have even asked for occupancy but from what Dad told me they were full up. Some people have all the luck.

The first time I saw a cicada shell I wondered how such a small dinosaur turned fossil came to be on a chain-link fence in western Indiana. I asked, “Where do those click-clickers come from?” The ground, the air, somewhere far away entirely — my parents didn’t know. Maybe France, I asked, hoping they’d say no. Because whatever kind of monster could break from extinction was terrifying in my eyes, the survival aspect being of particular concern. That type of struggle I knew all too well. When cicadas flew near, I ducked.

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“You should wear the energy crystal I got you.”

“Lost it during the move,” I said to Dad, using his preferred framing of our eviction. “Didn’t do much good anyway. Was wearing it when you and Mom got busted so. Out of gas.”

He gave me this knowing smirk. Same sort as Mom waving away reason when presented to her. “Not how the forces of mysticism work.”

I mentioned getting robbed and Dad got so mad at me one of the guards came by to say shut the fuck up or else. We used phones to talk through plexiglass meaning no smuggling. Just vague updates about Mom getting what she needed, did she look alright. This was the first time I’d told him anything about myself. Mental note was made not to repeat the mistake.

“How’s the harvest looking?”

I told him not so good, the grow-house being mostly in the seedling stage. We’d be clean out soon according to Pete, who did the planting so to speak. That set Dad off even worse.

“Find a way,” was the last thing he said before getting dragged off, eyes popping like those gators on *Planet Earth* mid-lunge. I don’t know if he said *or else* but heard it all the same.

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Terre Haute got its name from French explorers way back meaning “highland” after the bluffs by the Wabash River. We were still limping from one of those vanished economies, something about local bituminous coal deposits AKA mining. Learning the local history in elementary school gave me those first dreams of France. I pictured an ancestral homeland calling to me, long lost family with old money waiting on their prodigal daughter to return. I had to believe or else what did I have? False hope was better than none. Preacher Pete made a living off that fact.

Pete’s threat of a flood came from a local legend meant to spook kids. Story goes different depending on the teller. But always ends with the Wabash rising so high it empties into Terre Haute like a bathtub sans drain. Terrible way to go for us landlocked folk.

Some claimed the flood really happened. That the area’s namesake was borne out of appreciation for having saved the French explorers. Couldn’t see it myself, but every so often a story would crop up of fish skeletons dug from places they had little business being. Mom and Dad pushed the fairytale harder than most, naming every creek and pond “a vestige of the rising tides of our past.” Dry tides I called them on account of their not existing.

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The sunny side about my great-uncle was his lack of being around. Whatever time Pete devoted to keeping the mushrooms alive was done in the secrecy of night, leaving me alone during the day once he sped off to church in the mornings. So it was a surprise to see the straight-backed scarecrow in our grow-house the morning after my visit to Dad. Fingernails black like his clergy shirt. Bag of soil gutted along the floor.

“Alright?”

He jumped at the sound, gave me a tongue lashing for scaring him. Then went back to misting the mushrooms with a spray bottle.

“No sermon today?”

“I’m taking a sick leave of absence in perpetuity.” Pete had a pretentious way of talking, stitching big words together so as to appear smart but really not.

“What you come down with?”

“A fist for that mouth if it keeps asking questions.” Sort of thing he said and meant my mouth had already discovered. “Get to the house and grab me the spore syringe on the counter. I ordered fresh ones for the mycelium.”

The walk from the grow-house to Pete’s was long, his land nothing if not big in that old-Indiana way that was almost always inherited from farmers. A common flex for Pete was to pretend he was just like them. Tilling holy domain. Cultivating the earth, he would say. The man could be buried in a valley of his tales if they weren’t so tall. Not all God fearers fear God.

Pete was mixing coffee and hay mix when I got back. “Keeping everything alive is getting harder and harder. Help me with this, will you? Stir it...stir it slow. Easy now.” I could tell something was off in Pete’s eyes. Confirmed when he took a precision knife to a mushroom and helped himself. “People saying I been possessed. Obsequious! Who’s possessed?”

I told Pete I didn’t say a word but he wasn’t on this planet. Guess it was a matter of time until he sampled the wares. Given our shortage, I would’ve hoped he’d gone easier on the portion.

Great-uncle Pete was old, really old actually. Upper eighties I think but no one was sure. He didn’t have a cellphone on the basis of them being “pornographic” though the real reason he told me once: that he avoided his reflection at all costs. It’s why he didn’t have any screens or mirrors

in the house. The wrinkles, the liver spots, eyes melting off — I get it. Don't look forward to aging myself, the game of life being unsurvivable.

Truthfully the worst part about Pete was his house. Sure I caught a smack once or twice for zero reason but nothing worse. I'd take a few more for a clean bathroom, or at least one not clogged by crusty green stalactites under the faucets, sink and tub both, made worse by the mold freckled along the caulking that gave me fevers and bad breathing. My great-uncle operated under the delusion Jesus himself was only a prayer away to pick up after him. Always getting his flock to agree to "servicing the church" which were pretty words for fixing up the back deck or, if he netted a lady, some form of laundry. No one came twice.

"So why you taking a leave of absence?"

Pete threw a fist my way. Led with the knuckles too. I thought for a second about hitting him back even though I'd get my ass kicked. Kept it together though, a miracle in its own right. And wasn't it funny that such a thing could occur right before his pious eyes, my composure a genuine parting of the seas, and what does the man do but stare right through me as if invisible.

"Some people keep good folk down for no Godly reason."

Not wanting to get hit again, I asked if there were any deliveries to make. Surprisingly, Pete said yes. Packed a few mushrooms in a plastic baggie and sealed it with a lighter. The drop off was by the golf course in Idle Creek. Not your typical spot for a drug run. I said it was too far without my bike but Pete told me to walk it. We argued and he threatened to string me up before finally tossing over keys.

"I can't drive."

He was looking directly at one of our heat lamps when he said, "Learn."

The truck would've given Mom a heart attack. Half-finished bags of Jimmy John's. Empty pops rolling around the back. The air freshener was the closest Pete ever got to being funny, a new-car-smell vent clip caked in some substance, Chick-Fil-A sauce, snot, anyone's guess. I tried the ignition before tossing the baggie into the glove compartment, but it caught on the sharp end of another X-Acto hiding inside. How many does a Preacher need?

The mushrooms spilled all over the floor mat. Took ten minutes to fish out the caps from the divots. The Lord's work indeed.

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The thing about magic mushrooms, normal ones at least, is that they won't turn you out much — getting angry like with booze or zonked the pill way. It's a swirly experience by most accounts. But since we'd laced ours with things from vials and prescription bottles, the effects started driving our Preacher to places not unlike those siren-seeking college kids, seeing nonexistent home-invaders on the daily, hearing voices through the walls. Naturally, everything happened because of God. Always did whenever Pete was backed in.

It was never clear to me what religion my great-uncle hawked. It was probably none specially. More a cult situation which was far from uncommon around Indiana, home of the MLM and scam central for phishing, catfishing, life coach, lottery, and sweepstake; all our brainchildren, ask anyone. The threat of eternal damnation was a decent enough hook so his flock was a couple dozen strong. They ran out of an old YMCA rent-free courtesy of a city councilor being member to the tribe.

As it turned out, the Idle Creek delivery was for the city councilor herself. Never actually met her outside a picture on the living room mantle framing a woman and three boys with straw hair combed up a way that looked expensive. The cleaning lady let me in and didn't ask questions,

just come on through, the office is down the hall to the left, shoes off if you please. I would leave the baggie on the desk as instructed and pocket the same envelope of cash every time. Stopped bothering to count it. Not the kind of place that stiffed people like me.

I did this for a while before the second possible outcome of drug dealing reared its head. And let me tell you, getting jumped was the better experience.

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It was Independence Day. Neighbors out in their yards tossing corn hole. Styrofoam coolers filled with beer. I pulled the truck over to take in the clean weather after a week of rain. Saw a cicada hole down in the mud by a maple tree. It was the size of a coffee can, an ominous entrance. I wondered about putting my hand in there before thinking twice. I wasn't an idiot, understood full well the insanity of my almost-actions, but I wasn't feeling much control in the moment. Like someone made me move that wasn't me. Crazy how we can lose ourselves without the drugs. Without even trying. Just by thinking a thing we shouldn't be and doing it for no good reason. Surviving others, surviving ourselves. Which was harder? Sometimes I couldn't say.

Only a few minutes after I got back on the road, I crashed. Being an untrained kid behind the wheel finally caught up with me. Or maybe I was still thinking about that hole in the ground. Doesn't matter the reason. I got distracted and ran the truck into a ditch. Drove through some cattle fence surrounded by a mossy patch of mushrooms if you can believe. Would have laughed if I had time, but a police car pulling up the rear set a different tone. Lights did their twirl. Thousand-pound man looking overheated behind Dollar Store aviators stepped out the cruiser.

“You can't seriously be driving?”

I said, “No officer, just walked up on this.” Stupid lie since I was in the driver’s seat with an airbag busting into my chest. Blood down the side of the head too, though not much. But still. Hardly an innocent bystander.

Cop told me to get out while he checked the truck. The glove compartment suddenly seemed a bad place to hide my stash. Couldn’t believe I didn’t think to grab the baggie and stick it down my pants. Hindsight really is crystal clear. It’d only take a few minutes for the guy to find it.

“I seen kids like you all the time. Driving around daddy’s farm pretending cars are toys. These are *nothing* to play with.” His voice was a cigarette rasp. “Dirt bikes, ATVs, and now this. Won’t be surprised when I’m fishing a eight-year-old out the cockpit of a 747. You know it’s a crime operating a motor vehicle without a license, right? And look what you’ve done to the fence. Whole thing’s busted.”

Whatever I could do to encourage the notion I was a farm girl doing farm girl things, I did. Saying I knew it was dumb. Saying I was surely in for a hiding from Ma and Pa. Cop was so caught up in the senselessness of it all he couldn’t see it made no sense. Told me he’d drive us back to my parents once the tow truck came around. I said thanks so much, mind if I grab my backpack for school?

“School? It’s July.”

“Summer school.”

That was enough. Off he waddled to his cruiser. I went back inside the truck, grabbed the mushrooms, and swallowed them. Barely chewed. Then took off running for the woods.

If he followed it wasn’t for long. No way to catch me in that cruiser with all the trees. And a man of his size had no interest in a foot chase. I kept going for a half hour, maybe longer, until I

came to the edge of a hill by the Wabash River. Sat on the beach for a minute to catch my breath and admire the beauty that saved my skin.

By that point I was feeling the mushroom's effects. Not much to compare the experience with. Colors too bright for the natural world. Everything missing the outline of their shape. My own fingers had turned into tree roots gnarled with each other. I was working on pulling them apart when I felt something cold soak my shoes. Looked down and there was a pool of water above my ankles.

The river had run over and was rising fast. One second it was at my shins, the next above my knees. I sprinted up the hill, hopping over woodfall along the bank, my calves burning from the steep slope. Every stride was a struggle, my mind blitzed by thoughts of drowning. I couldn't swim. As I ran, I passed people climbing out of pits in the ground like the cicada nests from earlier. Only these were the size of a manhole. I only realized who the people were when I nearly fell into one. They were me. Identical copies, right down to my clothes.

I was keeping pace ahead of the tide, but the others weren't faring as well. Fair few got washed back down the holes they were trying to get out of. Some tripped over rocks or tangled their legs. Most just gave up, keeled over exhausted before disappearing under the water.

I didn't look back until reaching the hilltop. Terre Haute was swallowed under a sea stretched to the horizon. All that was left were mossy peaks sticking out the water like icebergs. None of the other versions of me made it. Surviving instead of others felt the same as protecting others at my own expense. I sacrificed too much for my parents and Pete. Figuring that out saved my life. Because in the end there's high ground and there's holes. False hope and the real type. Deliverance delivered. Mom's only promise kept.

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I landed in juvie by dinnertime. Charges got dropped the next morning once they busted Preacher Pete. The law had an eye on him already, and suddenly I became an eleven-year-old again, the idea I could be responsible for running drugs a plain joke. About the first stroke of luck in my life.

Child Services stuck me in foster care with a lady named Lola. Made Pete look like a spring chicken but I wasn't complaining, she was more than decent. My obligations were nothing beyond dishes and dusting, and in return was served up three meals a day that always featured corn. Woman of my heart. I was heading to a new school in the fall, had to make up the time I missed doing summer classes. The irony was not lost on me.

Lola promised to help. If getting cut loose was luck, I'd won a lottery's worth with her. She even drove over to Pete's house after the raid and salvaged what little I owned: clothes, the energy crystal Dad got me, my posters. And a manilla envelope labelled LETTERS FROM MOM AND DAD. Inside was over five thousand dollars —my best kept secret. Skimming off the top of deliveries snowballed big time, though it would have felt like more of a triumph if I'd been paid in the first place. The money was fair wages for fair work as far as I was concerned.

"Sweet of you to keep the letters," Lola said when she handed the envelope over. "Your parents will be so glad. Bet they make them into a book once they're out."

I smiled. The mushrooms were done which made trips to the penitentiaries done too. My decision. Doubt I was missed. Whatever hyperdimensional cosmos dictated my parents' choices was no longer a concern. Told the old lady the energy crystal she found wasn't mine, she could toss it.

The money I kept. Over the next year I'd use it to get a passport and travel agent for a trip abroad. Normally beyond reach until you account for the new chunk of change weighing down

my pocket. I'd learned the hard way how kids living like adults usually ended, so Lola would come with.

She asked why France? I told her I was making good on a promise. But the other part went unmentioned. How I was looking for somewhere to lose myself in the crowds. A place to shed the shell of Terre Haute and its solitude, no longer one among few. Knew what I'd become if I didn't start seeing more than what I was born into.

Maybe France wouldn't be what I was looking for, but there was no way to know without going. Those beachside towns from the posters seemed a good a place to start.