

Author's Note: This was originally the fourth chapter of the first section of A PARTICULAR OBEDIENCE. The editor convinced me that some of the sections and chapters were drug scenes for their own sake, not adding anything to the story. So it was cut.

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The other room on the fourth floor was a television room, where Stockard, Eve and Emily, who were all born within three years of each other, would spend their time, watching television and smoking hash. The walls of the fourth floor rooms slanted in with the roof. Dormer windows added some space. It was up so many flights of stairs that only Ismelda, the Guatemalan maid who lived in the basement, would go to the fourth floor. The other “adults” waived the ascent.

As the girls had at first tentatively lit the hash in the red pipe and then become frequent imbibers, they had identified three distinct phases of being high. First there was the toe dipping. It was the very beginning of the smoke, where they were lighting up the hash and waiting for the effects. It was a quiet time when space and time altered ever so slightly, ever so gradually, like a ballet dancer moving through a gelatinous dream. They noticed that things were starting to change as they leaned back into the sofa. The air itself had become thicker, the walls closer and softer. If they were careful with how much they smoked, they would soon enter into the second phase, which was a brisk swim. It was the talkative phase, where they enjoyed a sudden rush of euphoria and they chattered. There was only one focal point, a mouth talking, the way smoke rose above a lock of hair, the

television flickering it's blue rays. Nothing else was noticed. A maddeningly detailed but somehow vague conversation could quickly become a focal point. The brisk swim phase could fluctuate wildly, but it would eventually lead to the dead weight phase, where it felt as if someone had tied a giant cement block to their legs and they had sunk to the bottom of a very warm, very deep pool. If the dead weight period was allowed to go on too long, they would lapse into a deep sleep. Stockard was always the first to go to sleep. She was already a natural sleeper. It was usually Emily who would pour out little shot glasses of espresso, made with her mother's Gaggia long before the smoking session had begun, in an attempt to wake everyone up. After the caffeine injection, they would light the dragon pipe and try to enter the toe dipping phase, again. Sometimes if they smoked too much, they could go from toe dipping to dead weight and sleep was unavoidable. They loved smoking hash.

By four thirty on a spring afternoon, the girls were in the brisk swim phase of their hash session, sitting on the sofa, with the television on, chatting about the repetitiveness of plots, especially on Gilligan's Island and the Beverly Hillbillies. By six thirty they had been through so many complete cycles that they were losing track of what time it was or wasn't. They had been hitting the pipe very hard when they heard Evelyn's voice.

"Girls, girls, are you ready?"

"Oh, shit," said Emily, "what's today?" She wore her familiar corduroy skirt and black turtleneck, her copy of *Go* never too far away.

"Err, uh, Thursday," said Eve, looking instantly sober and stunned.

“Oh, shit! I forgot.” Emily’s hand automatically went to her forehead, an ingrained television gesture. “We’re supposed to go out to dinner. To celebrate something. I can’t remember...”

Emily darted off the sofa and out the door of the TV room, leaving Stockard and Eve startled by her alertness. They could hear Emily yelling down the stairs. “We’re running late. Can you give us fifteen minutes?” Was her voice too loud?

“Okay, but hurry,” came Evelyn’s response, her voice carried up the thick air of opiumville. Emily could almost see her mother’s voice rising up the stairwell, an image that stuck in her mind as she returned to the television room, where her cousin and her sister looked as if they had been flattened with a spatula onto the sofa. Stockard’s eyes were already half closed.

“Shit,” said Emily. “What are we going to do?”

Her voice prodded Eve to a sitting position. “Let’s go. What else can we do?”

“I’m too fucked up,” said Stockard. “I can’t. Tell ‘em I’m sick.”

“If I’m going, you’re going,” said Emily.

“No. I’m really fucked up,” said Stockard. Her southern accent and the hash stretched the word “really” on for a mile. “I’m reeeeeeeaaaleeeeeeee fuuukkked up.”

“We’re all fucked up,” said Emily, “but we’ve got to go.” She was lost in thought for a moment, one hand on corduroy-cladded hip, the other scratching the side of her head. “I can’t remember what we’re celebrating.”

Emily’s paranoid confusion and stumped questioning was starting to infect Eve. “Someone’s birthday?”

“No. I don’t think so,” countered Emily, her hand still scratching her head.

Eve’s back straightened further, almost lifting her off the sofa. “What else could it be?”

“We can’t do this,” said Stockard from her union with the sofa, “we’re too fucked up.”

“Shut up,” said Emily, “you’re not helping.”

There was a silence that stretched on and on, Emily and Eve looking at each other, Stockard staring at the flickering television. The silence was finally broken.

“It’s,” said Stockard, “Mother’s,” her voice disembodied, “birthday,” her eyes locked on the television, where the S.S. Minnow was opening another episode of Gilligan’s Island.

“That’s it!” said Emily, doing a little jump. “At Luigi’s. Pizza. Spaghetti! No dressing up. Easy!”

Stockard was off the sofa with a sigh and walked the ten feet to her bedroom as if she had not had use of her legs in years. She couldn’t look at the bed in her room. One glance and she’d have to lay down and then she would sleep a deep sleep and would never make it to her mother’s small birthday celebration. She tried to not even think of the word, “sleep.” She chose a longish, pleated skirt, a plain white blouse, and a light cardigan. She turned around and there was Emily standing in the doorway.

“Oh, shit, Emily, you scared the shit out of me.”

“Sorry. You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. This is what we get for not going out more. Functional stonerism. We lack functional stonerism. I suppose it’s not that big of a deal.”

It had been ages since Evelyn had yelled up the stairwell.

“Well, we’ll see. I keep having moments of absolute panic,” said Emily. “I feel okay right now. We’ll see.”

They stood for a moment and then started down the stairs. On the third floor, they pried Eve out of her room.

On the endless journey down the stairs, Emily was becoming fascinated with how each flight of stairs was different. The stairs themselves were similar, stained hardwood with oriental carpet runners. The walls were different, starting with formal on the first floor and ending with almost bleak on the fourth floor, with different wall paper, paint or trim work on each level. The fourth floor stairwell had white walls and off-white clunky trim. The third floor stairwell had a burlap grain solid beige wallpaper on the bottom half. The top half was painted white. Three girls going down stairs made an incredible amount of noise to her.

On the way down Stockard was having her own mental journey, watching her cousins’ heads bob up and down in front of her. Eve was out front, her shoulder length reddish brown hair straight and parted on the side. Emily wore her hair much longer, often tied in a ponytail as it was now. Stockard was thinking about her grandmother and her aunt. Aunt Evelyn was an extension of her grandmother. They were a wall between the family and the outside world, a Great Wall of China behind which the other Griffin women hid.

“China,” said Stockard aloud, and laughed a little thinking of the red pipe with the gold dragon running down the side.

Her grandmother had always been a tough woman, calling things “ridiculous” without restraint. “That ridiculous first husband of yours,” Stockard

had heard her grandmother say to her mother, “Sammy.” Sammy was Stockard’s seldom seen father. He was terrified of his ex-mother-in-law. There were the “ridiculous prices of fresh groceries” that had led Margaret to open her own chain of fresh grocery stores, essentially forcing local Nashville grocery stores to lower their prices.

Aunt Evelyn was just as harsh. When Stockard’s aunt had found out about her husband’s infidelities, she had not been quietly tolerant. She had gone to confront Abe, but not before going to confront the mistress, a kept “loose” woman on the edge of Greenwich Village. Emily and Eve – Stockard still wondered if it was intentional that her aunt and her cousins all had names that started with E, if it was some strategy for Aunt Evelyn to save on monogramming costs – had overheard bits of the story, how Aunt Evelyn had let herself into the mistress’ apartment and the mistress had found her there. Afterwards, Evelyn had headed straight for Abe’s office to confront him immediately. Abe had slipped out of his office before Evelyn got there. The mistress must have called him. He had gone to their Connecticut house to blow his brains out with her great grandfather’s shotgun. Now that was power! When someone would rather die than face you, you had real power.

The clump clump of the girls descending the stairs finally stopped and the three were on the first floor.

Emily turned to Stockard and said, “What was that about China and Ridiculous?”

“Oh,” said Stockard. She could feel the heat rush to her face. “Nothing. Just thinking out loud.”

“Not really a good idea all things considered,” said Emily.

“Got it.” Stockard tried not to laugh.

Here on the first floor was the living room, the dining room and the kitchen of the brownstone. They were the most formal rooms in the house. Stockard had passed the living room many times to glance men in suits, always grey suits and white shirts, sitting in that room with her grandmother and often her aunt, talking seriously. Even the sofa looked like high business. It was a slender Chippendale, not comfortable at all. She had not once seen her mother, April, sitting with the suits.

“Sorry, we’re late,” said Stockard as they joined Margaret, Evelyn and April in the living room. The walk down the stairs had raised her pulse and she felt almost fully awake. She kissed her mother on the cheek. “Happy Birthday, Mom.”

“Thank you, darling,” said April. “Sorry to drag you girls out of your beloved TV room” – she gave Emily a knowing look – “but with the two of you off to school next year, it occurred to us that we don’t have very much time together.”

The restaurant was a left turn at the next intersection, a five minute walk from the brownstone. Their home looked so thin from the outside. It was hard to believe that six women – seven if you counted Ismelda – lived under that roof. Once around the corner, there was the familiar flag of Italy, painted across signboard, “Luigi’s” black lettered. The pace of Margaret’s determined walking and the bustle of being sat down largely hid how stoned the three girls were. Emily and Stockard picked up the heavy conversational work, which amounted to standard questions about Morary’s, the girls’ school which all three attended.

Eve sat between Emily and Stockard. Emily talked with April. Stockard talked with Margaret and Evelyn. Eve had a bad moment when the waiter came for her order. She had to look at the menu five times to remember what she wanted. She looked, saw “Pepperoni Pizza,” looked up from the menu and was about to tell the waiter when the words, “pepperoni pizza,” had completely escaped her. She would look at the menu again, and the cycle would begin, again. Each time Eve would start to get a little bit more frantic, Emily noticing her sister’s breathing picking up pace.

Emily finally intervened. “She wants pepperoni pizza.”

The waiter looked at Eve, who was nodding her head. He wrote it down on his little pad of paper.

“She always wants pepperoni pizza at Luigi’s,” said Emily, looking into Eve’s eyes.

Eve got the message and tried to breathe while Margaret and Evelyn ordered lasagna and April ordered a calzone. The girls ate pizza. It was a matter of habit.

“Excuse me,” said Stockard, “but I think I’ll tootle off to the bathroom.”

Luigi’s was a small restaurant with small bathrooms. Stockard had to stand over the toilet to close the door. It was that small. She felt a wave of relief as she sat down. Here was peace for a moment. Everything was going well enough, but there was an edge to the whole atmosphere that was driving Stockard gradually nervous. In the bathroom, she had a respite, a brief silence in her mounting tension. She would collect herself, pee and then return to the table. They would see the dinner through and then call it a night. Stockard could feel her bed calling her. It wasn’t

even a quarter of a mile away and she wanted to be in it, to put all of this behind her.

When she went to open the door, the handle turned but the door wouldn't open. She tried it a second time. A third time. It would not open. The word "TRAPPED" flashed through her mind. Stockard took a step back and said to herself, "relax, breathe deeply, focus, focus. Come on Mr. Doorknob, work with me, let loose of your little doorjamb." She reached down and twisted the doorknob again and pulled the door. It didn't move. She took another step back, her breathing starting to quicken. Her voice exploded, rushed right out of her mouth. She had no control over it. "Help! Help! Help!" She was screaming. "Help! I'm stuck in the bathroom." Then she beat her fists against the door, screaming, "Help! I'm in the bathroom. I'm stuck in the bathroom."

There was a man's voice on the other side. "Are you okay in there?"

"No!" Stockard's southern accent came out, slow and pitiful now. "No, I'm stuck in this goddamn bathroom."

"Have you tried the doorknob?" His voice had an accent. Italian?

"Yes, I'm afraid I have."

"Try it once more, please, miss." The man's voice on the other side sounded so calm, so in control.

Stockard reached down, twisted the doorknob, and pulled the door again. It didn't budge.

"It won't open!" Stockard was stuck between a debilitating self-pity and a sudden urge to break the door down. "Help!"

"Calm down, miss... please. Are the latches undone?"

“What?” Stockard’s eyes took in the various locking apparatus screwed, hollowed and mounted up and down the door frame.

“Are the latches undone? There are two sliding latches. Two that work. Are they both undone?” The man’s voice calmed Stockard, again pulling her back from the edge.

“What...” Stockard stopped for a moment. Latches. What the fuck was he talking about? Did she say that out loud? She looked at the door, this time making herself breathe slowly, and she saw a single slider, one of the manual jobs you slide across the door frame after you’ve closed a door. It was closed and keeping her from opening the door.

She slid the latch and opened the door. There was a waiter – not their waiter, thank God – standing in the hallway. She said, “Sorry about that.”

“Not a problem, miss.”

The bathrooms were down a hallway and at the back of the restaurant so that Stockard’s yelling and banging did not reach the dining room, hopefully, she thought. She returned to the table with her long hair looking as if she had been caught in a windstorm. She was visibly perspiring.

“Maybe you don’t need a sweater,” said Emily over the back of Eve. “You look hot.”

“Huh?”

“You’re sweating. You look like you just ran a marathon.”

“Oh.” Stockard managed to get out of her cardigan and mopped her face with her napkin. It was the first time in her life that she ever actually wanted a beer. It would taste so good after all that she had been through. It was the cold beer thirst

that Stockard would have for the rest of her life. Up until that moment, Stockard had been a non-drinker.

As conversation cruised along and the food disappeared, Eve started to come down and was feeling very tired. She too wanted the night to be over. She wanted to go home and go to sleep. It was Stockard who leaned over to Eve and said, "I don't know how she does it, but Emily has an iron will when it comes to a serious countenance. She's so responsible."

"I cannot believe she's my kid sister," whispered Eve back. "Such a cool customer."

At that moment, the waiter swooped to the table, removing their empty plates. He returned shortly with his pad of paper, stood at the head of the table, and said, "And would you ladies be interested in dessert?"

It was the way that the waiter had said it. "Dessert." Half serious. It caught Emily's ear. "What?"

"Would you like a dessert?"

Emily thought the waiter was the funniest person she had ever seen. First a smile spread across her face and then the slightest little snort came out of her nose.

"What do you have," asked Margaret, who never ordered dessert. She saved herself for a stiff snort of whiskey, her nightly nightcap.

Emily could feel her smile spreading from her lips to her ears. It was a most peculiar feeling. She had no control over it. The smile rolled all the way down her neck. Another snort came out, this one a little bit louder.

April looked at Emily and said, "Dear, are you alright?"

Emily nodded her head a couple of times. She took a deep breath and said, "It's too funny." She took another deep breath.

"What is?"

"Everything." It was as if by opening her mouth and letting her voice out, her laughter wanted out too and there was nothing that Emily could do to control it. She started to laugh and the more she tried to control it, the more convulsive her laughter became.

Eve was transfixed at her sister's behavior. She could do nothing but stare at her. If Emily was lost, they were all lost, she thought.

Emily's cackles were a runaway train and the table had stopped to watch her. Stockard thought the entire restaurant, indeed the entire universe had stopped to watch the uncontrollable laughter of Emily. Tears were starting to roll down her cheeks.

For a moment, Emily got a grip on herself. "Sorry," she said, "it just tickled me."

"What tickled you," asked Evelyn.

Emily snorted again and this time let the laughter roll out. Her stomach began to hurt and yet the laughter kept coming out of her. Hah hah hah. Loud snort. Hah hah hah. Deep breath. Stifled snort. Hah hah hah. It rolled in waves out of her.

"My God," said Stockard, "I think she's been possessed by the laughing demon."

Eve thought this was funny and began to laugh, too. This only fed Emily's laughter, which was rising in pitch every minute. It lapsed into slow, aching laughter. Ah. Ah. Ah. She had to grip the table.

Stockard looked at the waiter, who had turned to stone as Emily had gone into laughing land, and said, "I'll take the cheesecake."

"Me, too," said Eve, who was only slightly laughing.

"Cheese..." Emily could not stop laughing. "Cheese... CAKE!" All of the sudden Emily stopped laughing and went deadly serious. "Me, too."