

Prankster

by [Barry Fields](#) (August 2024)



The World of LSD (Milton Glaser, 1967)

Dave pulled over at the bottom of University Avenue. The hitchhiker opened the front door and bent over to look inside. Her long, tangled hair framed a face that showed signs too much sun.

"I'm going south," Dave said. "Monterey."

She dropped her backpack in the rear seat next to his duffel bag, threw the map in back without bothering to fold it, then climbed in front. He expected a greeting, something like "thanks for stopping," but she barely glanced at him.

As soon as she closed the door, he regretted picking her up. Her pungent body odor quickly permeated the car. He merged onto the highway while rolling down the window with his left hand, but he road noise assaulted his ears more than her smell offended his nose. He rolled up the window and turned on the air conditioning, a neat feature of many of the new 1968 models. It barely made a difference.

"My name's Dave."

"You can call me Venus."

A short, plain summer dress with thin shoulder straps reached just above the knees. It hung loosely on her, a size too large. In her mid-twenties, he guessed, some years older than him. Underarms unshaved, thin lips, sunken cheeks, prominent chin. Mildly attractive but far from his idea of the goddess of love.

"Is that your real name?"

"It depends on what you think is real."

"If that's your name."

She answered with a silly singsong rhyme:

"If you think you know me by my name
You're totally a loser and completely lame
Cause Venus or another I'm still the same."

He couldn't say whether she made it up on the spot or had practiced it. Whichever it was, in addition to smelling bad, she was a nutcase. "What's your name, really?"

"Venus. Why is your hair so short?"

"I get it cut that way."

"You look like an anal retentive narc. Narcs creep me out."

"I'm not a narc. I'm in ROTC."

"A war monger. I got into a car with a fucking war monger."

He resisted the impulse to snap back at her—certain to create more friction—and changed the topic. "Where are you from?"

"I'm not from anywhere, but you can find me everywhere. Just like God."

He'd picked her up for congenial companionship on the road. She wasn't about to provide it. He'd look for an excuse to drop her off as soon as he could. "Okay, where are you going?"

"It's not the destination that's important, it's where we are now. The adventure is now." She started singing the current Steppenwolf hit, "Born to be Wild," while air-strumming a nonexistent guitar.

He cut her off, annoyed by her insults and her being so difficult. "Cut it out. If you want me to take you somewhere, tell me where you're going."

She looked as though he'd crushed her spirit the way you flatten a bug. She answered with dull expression, "La Honda."

“Where’s that?”

“A little place west of Cupertino. Not even a town, really. More redwoods than people.”

At least she could talk normally when she wanted to. “I’m from back East. I’ve never seen a redwood tree.”

She perked up. “Then you should totally come. It’s not too far out of your way. There’s this totally mystical feeling you get when you’re surrounded by them. They transport you to a land of magic, but you got to be ready to experience it. You have to meet the redwoods on their terms. They’re old and wise giants. They transmit these ancient energies. You feel them breathing and you’re breathing with them. You’re totally breathing each other. You know what I mean?”

“Sorry, I don’t go in for that mystical stuff.”

“Dickhead. The energy is there. Promise me you’ll try it.”

Dave focused on driving as if he hadn’t heard.

“Come on, promise. If you don’t, I’ll roll down the window and scream you’re raping me.”

He’d had enough. He couldn’t stand her another five minutes. Next exit, before she caused him big trouble. “Okay. I promise.”

“It’s got to be a real promise. Not just because I’m making you.”

“I promise. Really.”

She giggled, turned on the radio to a rock station, and cranked up the volume. They passed the mud flats on the edge of the bay, populated by driftwood and metal sculptures: fantastical beings and animals, an airplane, the words END WAR. Dave followed signs for Hayward when Route 80 turned to

go over the Bay Bridge to San Francisco.

Venus abruptly wedged herself between the bucket seats, knocking his elbow and causing Dave a moment of panic as the car swerved. "Watch what you're doing," he snapped, suppressing the urge to call her a nasty name.

Dave lowered the volume of the radio and yelled without turning around. "What are you doing? Get up front."

"Don't piss your pants, Davey boy. I'm not going to hurt your fancy car."

"Please don't ruin my map."

He didn't trust her alone with his duffel. He stayed with the slower traffic in the right lane so he could adjust the rear view mirror to see what she was doing. She'd taken off her dress and he could see her breast. His gaze continued shifting between the road and the mirror.

"Hey, driver, keep your eyes on the road."

"What are you doing?"

"Molting."

"Stop talking in riddles. What's going on?"

"You'll see. I totally hate this fucking dress. Also, my pits smell."

"Yeah, I noticed."

"Stop being a dick already. I've got a canteen with water and some deodorant. So I'm taking care of business and you take care of the driving. No peeking without an invitation." He heard her squirming, then a loud grunt as she kicked his seat.

What he'd seen of her body and what remained hidden from his limited view teased his imagination. Cheating, he glanced for

just a moment in the mirror but she had slipped something on. He raised the mirror and saw her face and cars behind them. In another minute she climbed into the front. She'd put on a pair of colored tights in various shades of red and fuchsia and a bright rainbow-hued unisex pullover. A braided leather headband completed her transformation into the quintessential flower child, but one with incredibly bad taste.

"What's that, a little bulge in your pants there?"

Dave felt his cheeks flush red. She upped the volume again, and "Magical Mystery Tour" filled the car. Dave turned the knob to lower the sound. Venus turned it back up.

"Pull off at the next exit," she commanded.

"Why?"

"My overbearing mother who was brought up a hundred years ago made me wear that dress. It's time to say goodbye."

He did what she asked. As the car slowed, she cranked down the window, and at the stop sign tossed out the dress. This was his chance to get her out of the car. Her vulgarity and bizarre behavior pushed him to get rid of her, but her breasts and the outline of the pubis under her outfit gave him pause.

The car idled at the stop sign.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked.

"You can't just throw something on the ground like that."

"It was sapping my life force."

All he had to do was to tell her to grab her things and get out. Instead he said, "It's littering."

"It's a gift to the universe. Someone will find it and treasure it."

A car honked impatiently behind him. He shook his head and continued through the intersection and up the highway entrance on the other side. "Why'd your mother make you wear that dress?"

"I was visiting my parents in Berkeley. I walked into the house like this and she totally freaked out and almost died of an apoplectic fit."

Some minutes passed in which she spoke to herself indistinctly. As the car sped along in the East Bay traffic, Dave made out occasional gibberish: "lost in the arms of the spiral," "the elephant doesn't make any fucking sense."

She was losing it. Alarmed, he asked, "What are you talking about? Are you alright?"

She answered, "I'm the goddess Venus, I just love a penis," and giggled, which gave way to sobbing and murmuring to herself again.

"What's wrong? Is there anything I can do?" Dave tried to hold his panic in check, fearing she might get violent. In case she tried to grab to the steering wheel, he held on tightly. One of his hands cramped up.

She began shouting. "I blew it. I blew it. I blew it. I blew it."

He tried to calm her down. "It's okay. We all make mistakes sometimes. It's not the end of the world."

She wiped away her tears with her shirt sleeve. "Here's the problem, Davey boy," she interrupted. "Money grows on trees no matter what they say. You just have to know how to pick the fruit, and I don't. It's a total bummer."

She was crazier than batshit, but at least she'd regained her composure. She reached into the back seat. When she sat down she held a joint in her hand.

“Want to smoke a doobie?”

“I don’t use that stuff.”

Venus pushed in the lighter, lit the joint when it popped out, and held her breath several seconds before exhaling. The sweet, heavy smell of marijuana filled the car, not really unpleasant, although he opened his window. She held the joint out to him. “Are you sure? It’s good shit.”

“I don’t like messing up my mind.”

She took another hit. “I totally love messing up my mind.”

“Drugs are for people who can’t handle reality,” he lectured, repeating what he’d been taught.

“Reality is for people who can’t handle drugs,” she countered. “The limited reality you mistake for the real thing, anyway.”

Dave had no idea what she meant. They drove in silence for several minutes, except for her occasional muttering. With her loud, mismatched clothing, she was a spaced out clown uttering nonsense. She belonged in a circus side show. He regretted not dropping her off.

“You’re a handsome one, Davey boy. Actually, more pretty than handsome. I’ll bet the square chicks in pigtails go apeshit over you.” She took a toke, held her breath, exhaled. “But you still look like a narc. What’s your bag?”

“You mean my duffel bag?”

“I mean what the fuck’s important to you?” Venus shouted irritably. “What are you doing with your time on earth? What’s your purpose here?”

Taken aback, he glanced at her and she glared back, the joint half gone. He drove for a while. “To be a good person,” he finally answered. “To do what’s right. To spread democracy

around the world and kick the commies out of Vietnam. To get everyone on board to stand behind our government.”

“Holy shit! You are one straight-laced, uptight establishment fucker, dude. If you’re not a narc, you totally should be. If you believe in democracy so much, tell me who elected you to tell people what they should or shouldn’t do?”

Her vehemence stunned him and left him without a response. He decided to let her off when he stopped for gas, which he didn’t even need. The joint had gone out and Venus put the roach in the ashtray.

“What are you doing with your life, then?” Dave asked.

“Expanding my consciousness and having as much sex as possible. Turning on, tuning in, and dropping out. Not hurting anyone. And sure as hell not telling them what they should be doing.”

They continued south past the turnoff for the San Mateo Bridge.

“There are things I just know are right, even if you don’t think so,” he said.

Venus scowled at him. “Like killing babies in Vietnam?”

“Like making the world safe from communism.” He took a more conciliatory tone to ease the friction. “Then there’s a lot I don’t know about, too. About what’s right. About life, mine in particular. I’m looking for answers.”

“Ken says to seek the mystery instead of the answer. What he means is, if you find the answer it makes you dead. If you dive into the mystery, you’re fresh and alive. Davy boy, you’re too young to be dead. You should totally drop some acid.”

“I thought you didn’t tell people what to do.”

"Sometimes you just have to make an exception. I've got some blotter acid Ken gave me. He always has the best. Come with me to the redwoods. We can drop acid together and fuck our brains out and lie down under the hugest, most mindboggling trees on the planet. Like I said, you'll meet ancient energies there that will totally blow your mind."

Her offer triggered off a rapid train of thoughts. In his freshman year at Rutgers, the whole first semester and most of the second he dated Mindy, a girl he cared for but who was as happy to hold onto her virginity as he was anxious to discard his. She broke up with him when she concluded his affection for her fell short of love. He ended the term a virgin and now, out of the blue he had an invitation to get laid.

She annoyed the hell out of him, but so what.

He didn't want to blow it. "How about we leave it at sex and the redwoods?"

"We all have our priorities. But you're missing out. After I met Ken and got to trust him, he turned me on to it. It totally opened up new worlds and he invited me onto the bus."

"The bus?"

"Further. That's the name of the bus. We rode all the way to New York to the World's Fair. 1964. The fair was a bummer, but I tripped on acid a lot. It was so cool. It totally changed me. After that there was no going back. Trust me like I trusted Ken and you'll totally thank me later."

"You're talking about Ken Kesey, the writer? Who wrote *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*?"

"Who the fuck did you think I was talking about?"

"Do you know how many Kens there are in this world?"

"What does that have to do with it?"

“Never mine. So you were one of his Merry Pranksters.” He’d heard about the ragtag group of depraved hippies that traveled with the celebrated author on an LSD-fueled road trip.

“He’s totally brilliant. He says turning the world onto LSD is more important than anything he’s written. I fucked him a bunch of times. His wife had to stay home with their kid and she doesn’t know, so don’t say anything.”

“I *totally* wouldn’t dream of it.”

The sarcasm soared over her head. She was just getting warmed up.

“I fucked Neal Cassady several times. He was such a speed freak, it was the only way to get him to shut up. We stopped in Houston, New Orleans, all kinds of cities. Every place we stopped I turned someone onto acid and fucked him.” She boasted as if glorying in a major life achievement. When Dave didn’t demonstrate the reverence she seemed to want, she upped the ante. “By the end of the trip I fucked every guy on the bus and eighteen guys on the road. I tried to fuck Alan Ginsberg in New York. He’s a great poet and all, but he’s a fag and blew me off. I even fucked one of the girls, although we were pretty out there when we did that.”

“Well, congratulations, I guess.” He wanted to know how two girls could do it without the proper anatomy. Or did she mean it figuratively, oral sex or something else she called intercourse?

“The Merry Pranksters were all about singing and dancing and celebrating life just because we could celebrate. Ken used to say you’re either on the bus or off the bus. Once I got on, I never got off, ever. We got back to California and there were these totally mind-blowing parties at his place in La Honda and we started doing acid tests every Saturday. The Grateful Dead was Ken’s house band, if you can fucking believe it. Oh yeah, I fucked Jerry Garcia and Bob Weir, too.”

She stopped and looked at him expectantly, waiting for words of admiration, he supposed. He found nothing praiseworthy in her drug-infused promiscuity. "Well, Venus, you sure get around."

She brightened and bragged she'd taken LSD over two hundred times. "We're going to Ken's old place now. He moved up to his farm in Oregon, that's where I got the acid, but there's almost always a few people around in La Honda."

Dave moved into the left lane to pass a junker creeping along at forty. "I don't know if that much LSD was good for you. You don't strike me as really celebrating. Actually, you seem kind of lost."

"I once was lost but now I'm found, whoopee!" Venus shouted. "Davey boy, you don't know diddlyshit. Do you want me to tell you about LSD?"

"Not really."

"The first thing to know is that when you take it you generate this totally new reality from the inside. Get it? Do not fucking answer. The reality, the inner reality, totally expands out into the cosmos. It reaches back to the wisdom of the Celtic mother goddess. I mean, it's fucking imprinted into our nervous systems and LSD totally rewires us to access it. It's all about the evolution of DNA." After blurting it all out rapidly, barely pausing for a breath, she said, "Okay, now you can talk."

"I didn't understand a thing you said. I don't think I want to."

"Words can't describe the change of consciousness LSD creates. It's got nothing to do with thought, only your experience. How would explain the taste of an orange to someone who had never tasted a citrus fruit in their life? You totally couldn't."

"Knowledge you can't communicate. What's the point?"

"My problem is that the knowledge vanishes after the drug wears off. Poof! Then I'm just this totally empty nothing. Acid takes me right through the doors of perception, but then the trip ends and I'm locked out. I have to do it again to get back in."

"Why don't you get comfortable with the reality that's here?"

"Dickhead." She made a point of ignoring him by looking out the side window.

After crossing the Dumbarton Bridge, they stopped at a McDonald's in Redwood City. He'd gotten used to her flamboyant outfit, but everyone in the dining area stared at her, reminding him of how outlandish she looked. A boy behind the counter asked her what she wanted, and she shouted her answer so loudly all the workers in the back turned to look "I want to turn you on, I want to fall into your arms, I want you to experience the fullness of life, I want you to leave this shit job and expand your mind, I want --"

"Get that hippie freak out of my restaurant before I have her arrested for harassing my staff." A balding, heavy set middle-aged man stood behind the counter next to the frightened boy, addressing Dave and pointing an accusing finger at Venus.

"Come on, Venus, act normal. You're embarrassing me," Dave said.

"Okay, let's all be mellow," Venus said mildly. "I want a Big Mac."

The manager pointed his finger at the door. "Out. Now."

Turning her gaze upward towards the ceiling, she held her arms straight out to the sides in mock crucifixion, and said, "Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do." Dave grabbed her arm and pulled her outside. She could get herself

arrested if she wanted to—after they had sex.

They found a Burger King nearby. Dave entered alone and came back with two Whoppers, fries, and Cokes, which they ate in the parking lot. They didn't converse, but she murmured softly to herself sing-song words that sounded like a nursery rhyme. Her ongoing antics and mental aberration exhausted him. He felt sorry for the pathetic mess of a human being Kesey's bottomless LSD dispensary had made of her.

He'd have sex with her anyway.

A moment of anxious doubt struck him, made his balls shrivel, like when he stared down from the edge of a high cliff. She'd been with men all over the country. He'd never gone all the way. How was he going to measure up?

As they drove south, city turned to suburbs and then countryside, with fewer and fewer houses along hilly, tree-lined roads. Impatient to get her ridiculous clothes off her, he found himself more than once taking a turn too quickly. Finally, Venus directed him along a dirt lane. After crossing a wooden bridge, Dave parked next to a soaring redwood tree in front of a large log home with two stone chimneys. "Incredible!" He craned his neck to take in the mindboggling tree towering above them. A short flight of stairs led up to an immense wood deck that spanned the length of the house. A few yards away the stream they'd driven over flowed lazily through the woods.

"This is it, the former home of the Merry Pranksters. We used to drop acid and have these totally amazing parties."

Yeah, he thought, getting high and not being picky about who got into your pants. He chided himself for judging her—he was about to be one of them. So she'd been with a huge number of men. Fine with him as long as he didn't get crabs or the clap.

Venus located the key. Inside, a central room with a large

oriental carpet looked out onto the forest. He searched for her in a large photograph on the wall of Kesey and his gang with the dayglow painted bus. He spotted her in a group on the roof wearing a pink cowboy hat.

Venus came in with her backpack and slid it from her shoulder onto the floor. "You still want to do it?"

This wasn't the candlelight romance he'd envisioned for his first time. He wanted a partner he cared for as he'd cared for Mindy back at Rutgers. Not an unstable woman he could barely tolerate who intimidated him by boasting about the men she'd had like a gunslinger notching his kills on his belt.

He wasn't about to tell her all that. "Does the sun rise in the morning?"

He followed her into a room, windows peering onto redwood trees and a bed with a rustic frame and headboard. Venus unceremoniously drew the shirt over her head and, topless on the bed, wiggled out of the tights. The sight of her, absent the loud, clashing clothing, quickened his heartbeat with equal measures of desire and apprehension. She struck him as sorrowful rather than sexy, lonely rather than alluring. He wanted to have sex more than he wanted to have her.

Venus lay down, ready for him. Did he detect a look of boredom as she watched him undress? Or was he being insecure? Although he had limited experience, Mindy had enjoyed petting above the waist and gratified him with her hands. He knew what was supposed to happen—up to a point. And then? Venus had been with lots of studs. How would she react to his tentative probing?

Get over it, he told himself. He lay down, his body against hers, and gently pressed his lips to her. She received the kiss with unresponsive lips. He pleased her in the ways he knew, taking his time, expecting a turned on Venus to use her hands as Mindy had.

She didn't.

She passively accepted his touch but nothing more, making a sound that might have been a moan but sounded more like humming a tune. She lay inert, as though the offer of her body was enough.

As his hand reached into new territory he hadn't explored previously, her arms remained at her sides. She was like a compliant patient receiving a pelvic exam. Was he doing something wrong? Had she brought this sort of lackluster pseudo-lovemaking to all the partners she'd bragged about? Or was her lack of participation payback for his criticisms of her? The more he worried, the less he could will himself into performing with a disinterested kook as inspiring as a blow-up doll.

A door slammed. "Hello, is anybody here?"

The voice came from within the house. They hadn't shut the bedroom door. To avoid being caught, quite literally, with his pants down, he quickly pulled up his jeans and put on his polo shirt and padded into the living room. A man with a big moustache and shoulder length hair as scraggly as Venus' stood in the living room. Wearing bell bottoms, a hip length Nehru jacket, and a long, colorful glass bead necklace, he held out his hand to Dave. "Hi, I'm Mike."

"Michael from Mountains, is that you?" She emerged from the bedroom.

"Hey, Lilly, what's happening?"

"Less than I thought would happen."

Neither of them seemed to find her nakedness remarkable, or that he called her Lilly.

"How are things going at the hospital?"

"Same as always. Sick kids everywhere. Some of them dying at five, six years old. It's so fucking heavy. They made me take some time off." She started crying like in the car earlier, looking out the window and letting the tears run freely.

Dave stared at her incredulously. She held down a real job. Earlier, she kept repeating she'd blown it. Maybe she'd gotten fired.

After a long minute she giggled, turned towards Mike, and asked excitedly, "Could you get behind seven hundred and fifty mics of totally pure blotter acid? I got it from Ken up in Oregon."

"Seven hundred fifty mics? We're going to be tripping for hours."

She disappeared into the bedroom and came back, still undressed. "Open wide for nurse Lilly." She placed a small square of paper on Mike's tongue and another on her own. They both chewed the paper and swallowed.

Dave had heard you could put drops of liquid LSD on small pieces of paper, but he hadn't known it was real.

Mike and Dave spoke at the same time. "Are you a nurse?" Dave asked, while Mike addressed him. "What about you?"

Venus-Lilly, apparently-ignored Dave's question and answered Mike's. "He's totally Middle America. Afraid of damaging the purity of his establishment brain."

"I'm not middle America," Dave objected. "I'm from New Jersey."

Mike asked Venus, "Were you and he doing the old in and out?"

She shook her head. "He's totally all show and no go."

Mike shot Dave a passing smirk and the two of them began

talking as if he had disappeared, animatedly exchanging places and names of people they both knew.

“How’s Sheila?” she asked.

“She’s great. We just bought a house in San Mateo. Talking about having a baby.”

Venus-turned-Lilly took both of Mike’s hands in hers. “Remember that afternoon in the meadow?”

Mike laughed. “When we did it doggie style and the cows were wondering what the hell was happening?”

“Want to get it on now?” she asked. “Any style you want.”

She turned without waiting for an answer and he followed her. Without looking back, she said, “Kiss off, Davey boy. Thanks for the ride.” She shut the door behind them. A moment later the door opened long enough for his shoes and socks to come flying out.

Dave walked to the car shaking his head. Talk about blowing it. Shaky confidence and her lack of involvement had led to a fiasco. This never would have happened had it been Mindy.

He hoped he could retrace the route back to the main road. Hand on the door handle, still feeling the sting, he changed his mind. Maybe there was something about the redwoods. He circled around the house and stepped into the forest, following a path that entered a large grove. He felt tiny and insignificant next to the massive soaring columns. Venus hadn’t exaggerated their awe-inspiring magnificence. Alone, a peaceful quiet reigned. His lungs filled with the fragrant air. The trees seemed to reinvigorate his strength. As promised, he lay down on the forest floor, a cool bed of dirt and needles, and looked high up into the dizzying canopy, ready to meet the ancient energies of the wise giants.

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Barry Fields lived and worked for many years as a psychologist in New Mexico, where two of his short stories placed in regional contests. In March of this year a short story, "A Matter of Justice," appeared in *34th Parallel Magazine*, and in April, "Induction Day" appeared in *Sundial: A Magazine of Literary Historical Fiction*. In addition, he has had numerous nonfiction articles in a variety of publications. He now lives with his wife and dog in North Carolina.

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