

“The Hippie Photo of Doom”

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There is a photo hanging in my kitchen. It sits nestled just above the thermostat in the narrow space of wall between the bathroom and the office.



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Here's a picture of the picture.

As you can see, it's in a nice flat black frame with complementary blue matting. I gave the photo to my wife Vickei on our first married Christmas together.

I know- that's all very cute. But why, you ask yourself, would I want to sit and read a story about some guy's Christmas present?

Well you wouldn't, unless you're one of those people who like that kind of thing- but I personally am not one of those people. Trust me, there's more to the story- and it's not particularly Christmas-ey either.

Anyway, Vickei and I first came across the photo while we were puttering around on the Internet- looking at old concert photos and promotional posters. Vickei and I are both Deadheads and so we were, predictably, looking at the Grateful Dead stuff in particular.

Just in case you cannot help yourself- feel free to insert your favorite Dirty Hippie Joke Here.

Still, you have to give the Dead credit- they appreciated the craftsmanship behind a really solid concert poster- and the philosophy behind the transmission of legends via both art and music. Most bands are lucky to have a single iconic image attached to them- the Dead have like 20- Dancing Bears, the Steal Your Face, the Terrapin Turtles, and Bertha the Skeleton. Indeed, the linking of sublingual images to...

Sorry about that- sometimes a philosophy degree is more trouble than it's worth.

The point is, when Vickei saw the photo she recognized it immediately from when she was on tour. There was this one particular vendor she kept seeing in the lots as the hippie nation made its way across the country who had this exact same picture for sale. All tour long Vickei wanted to buy it, but she was characteristically too broke to buy anything larger than a garlic grilled cheese. Nothing out of the ordinary there- being broke is just one of the downsides to touring when you're not drawing your money out of a trust fund.

When she saw the picture Vickei grabbed my hand and pointed at it- pulling it out of the clutter of images filling the screen.

“I know that photo.” She said, tapping directly on the screen, “See if you can make it bigger.”

I clicked on it and a slightly larger, but still too small image popped up. Because the site we were looking at was selling the photo we couldn't make it any bigger or save it to our MyPictures. We tried different tricks for a minute or two to accomplish this normally simple goal, but finally gave up.

I knew immediately I would be purchasing this picture for her for Christmas so I clicked away from the page as quickly as I dared and did my best to get her to forget we'd even seen it. Thankfully this was in April so she had plenty of time for it to slip her mind.

The photo shows people dancing at a Grateful Dead concert. For my wife, this photo captures the essence of a Dead show better than any other she's seen. Having studied it fairly extensively at this point I couldn't agree more with her assessment of the photo- it really is fantastic. There's dust flying around, two shirtless guys in the foreground are dancing around, their backs to the band with completely blissed-out looks on their faces- the band is barely visible far off in the distance- but the effects of the sound they're making is apparent even through the dust. It even has the standard topless girl nicely centered between the two dancing guys.

Vickei totally forgot about the photo, when I gave it to her it was a total surprise.



The thing is, once I hung up the picture and started looking at it closer. I noticed something very strange going on.



There were lots of people in the picture to look at.



But this one particular guy drew my attention.



This guy right here.

Why?

I'll give you a hint.

Here's a picture of me taken just today.



Notice a similarity?

I should point out that the photo hanging on my wall was taken August 28, 1982 at the Oregon County Fair in Veneta, Oregon by a photographer named David Warrington.

I was 6 years old when the photo was taken.

I've never been to Oregon, and even if I had, you'd be hard pressed to find any 6 year olds with a beard.

Perhaps you've seen Stanly Kubrick's "The Shining." You remember the last shot of the film? It's a black and white photo of Jack Nicholson in the basement of the Overlook hotel. Even though the picture is supposed to be from 40 years earlier- he looks exactly as he did during the film which was supposed to be in the 70's.

Seeing myself in that picture felt like that to me- I was thoroughly creeped out.

I started pointing this uncanny figure out to my friends and family. They all asked where I was when the picture was taken. "Was that at one of the Bonnarroos?" was the most common question.

"But it isn't me in the picture." I would insist.

"Well that guy really does look like you- that's a hell of a coincidence," my friends and family replied.

Sure, it's a coincidence.

Thing is, I don't actually believe in coincidences. The word 'coincidence' is just a cop out as far as I am concerned. It is what people say when they don't have a pre-programmed response for a set of circumstances. I try to explain this to people and everyone just tells me to lighten up.

The second I saw myself I knew I wanted to write some kind of a story about this mysterious photograph- maybe some kind of goofy David Sedaris riff on the image and the true self- so I went back to the Internet to find out the exact date the picture was taken- that's why I know this particular image was captured on August 28, 1982.

The site is called Wolfgang's Vault. Google it if you want, it's real.

What you will find as their page header is a section of the picture that is hanging on my wall as I sit in the office typing.

"What section is showing?" I ask for you.

I guess that's just another one of those coincidences. My doppelganger is mocking me from the dead center of the webpage.

I'm trying to be jokey here because there are a number of events that have transpired since that have me scared in a very non-hippie way. I'm writing this account of what happened to me 3 ½ months after seeing myself in the picture for the first time.

"Stop screwing around," Vickei told me 2 months ago when I try to explain the latest freaky occurrence with the Vault website, "You write sci-fi; stop pretending to be Stephen King."

True enough, but listen.

In early February I had tickets to go see Moe. with the Disco Biscuits at the Aragon. It was supposed to be my first show since Keller and Umphree's on New Year's Eve and I'd been looking forward to the show all through the gray January.

The morning of the concert I went to take the tickets off of the fridge.

They were gone.

I asked Vickei if she had them and she swore she didn't take them. She also said she'd seen them earlier that morning. I turned the area around the fridge upside down looking- but I couldn't find them. I didn't know who to be mad at- I believed Vickei when she said she had nothing to do with the tickets disappearing, but that didn't deter me from grumping around the house for the next week. Instead of seeing Moe we ended up watching VH1's Top 100 Toys that night.

Later- this was a couple of days after Valentine's Day, I found my ticket- or what was left of it. It was all crumbled up and it was pulled (when you enter a concert they pull off the perforated part, leaving you with the stub). I found the stub in a pair of pants that had somehow gotten crammed into the deepest bowels of my closet.

Now I'm pretty sure I haven't worn these particular pants in months and I'm completely sure I wasn't at the show. The pants were wrapped up with a shirt I'd been looking for... ever since the show. Even though it was a week and a half later, the pants still reeked like cigarettes. Disgusted, I threw them into the hamper and, ticket in hand, went to find my wife.

I showed Vickei the ticket and told her about the clothes- but she insisted there was a simple explanation. When I pushed her on what that explanation might be, she wasn't quick to come up with one. I felt quite vindicated until she turned the tables and asked *me* to explain what happened.

I was no more successful than she was at coming up with any theory at all- let alone one that wasn't laughable.

A week after I found the pants Vickei and I were cooking dinner and I was looking at the photo while we talked. An explanation suddenly occurred to me. I realized it wasn't the most likely explanation, but...

"What if it was *this* version of me that stole our tickets and went to the Moe. show without us?" I asked Vickei.

"What version of you are you referring to, honey?" She asked.

"The one in the photo."

“You’re saying the version of you in the photo came out, stole our tickets and went to the show? Seriously baby- you took way too many drugs in college.”

“No. I mean it.”

She stopped cooking long enough to make it clear how much she was rolling her eyes at me. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

I tried to convince her that my theory made as much sense as anything else- I didn’t have much luck in my attempt.

That was when she tried to say the photo didn’t look that much like me.



Yeah, sure.

And so the lines were drawn. On my side I had my argument that somehow this alternate version of me from 1982 was coming out of the photo, stealing my concert tickets and borrowing clothes to boot.

Vickei’s argument was more straightforward- I was, an am, an idiot.

Now, I’m willing to grant that my theory flies in the face of what most people would delineate as possible. And I am also willing to grant that on many occasions Vickei’s theory has been spot on. But every time I begin to doubt myself I take out that ticket stub and no other explanation presents itself.

I might’ve been able to let it go.

Maybe.

But then I started noticing bits of food missing. It was never stuff Vickei ate either. It was always my favorite stuff- Fritos, the individually wrapped String Cheese I keep in the butter drawer, the grapes, the last 1/3 of my Ben and Jerry’s Ice Cream.

Shirts I didn’t wear started showing up in the hamper and they always stunk terribly like sweat, even though it was winter. But it wasn’t just that.

Everybody has their own vintage of BO, and if you made anyone pick their own stinky clothes from a pile by scent alone- most of us could. We semi-evolved primates have a primordial ability to recognize our own scents. The mysteriously dirty shirts I found smelled like I had worn them.

Try explaining that little factoid to your already skeptical and increasingly annoyed spouse.

Now, if my doppelganger wanted to take my car and go to work for me- that’s a deal I could get behind. But no, this hippie slacker version of me just steals my food and wears my clothes. Last week I started staying up late into the night, trying to catch myself coming out of the picture. But I was too sneaky, and I haven’t been able to see myself.

I numbered and cataloged all of my clothes. I go through them to check they are all there before and after work every day. Since I started doing this nothing has been taken.

Or so I thought until this morning. I was down in the basement to perform the ever charming task of cleaning the litter box when I noticed one of the numerous boxes we keep downstairs was open. When I went to look at it I was only mildly shocked to see that it's contents had been divided into two halves. One side consisted of neatly folded piles of my old clothes, and the other was full of balled up and stinky clothes- that smelled like me.

This was essentially a declaration of war as far as I was concerned. I stormed up the stairs ready to pull the picture from its frame, ball it up, and burn it in the barbecue.

Vickei informed me in no uncertain terms that I was going to do no such thing. It was against my best judgment- but I listened to her. To be honest, my decision to go along with what she was saying was mostly due to her threat to call the guys with the white coats- the ones with arms that tie together around the back.

I vowed right then and there to stop this version of myself once and for all. Problem was- I didn't know how.

So I left for work like normal and waited a block away for Vickei to leave for her own job. Once she was gone I returned home. As soon as I was in the front door I was yelling.

“Okay you son of a bitch. You come out of that photo and face me like a man. No more of this sneaking around shit!”

I stalked right up of the photo and stood right in front of it. Even though I'd been ranting and raving about it to myself nonstop for the past couple of weeks I gotta admit I was completely taken by surprise when two perfectly articulated human arms reached out through the glass of the frame and dragged me in headfirst.

The next thing I know I'm looking out of this photo at my kitchen, the Grateful Dead are playing the show opener, Bertha, and I am the only person in the place who knows this song is going to blend nicely into Minglewood Blues- I've actually listened to the show before on Archive.org and I recognized it immediately. (It's really there- go check.) I'm writing this story on a series of rolling papers I borrowed from some old hippie guy with a voice like a pile of gravel and a pair of overalls covered in what seemed like hundreds of pockets.

When I look out on the horizon I can see through a rectangle and into my kitchen. I could see me, now freshly showered, smiling into the photo at me.

The bastard me waved sarcastically.

I flipped me off.