

Rachel, a 29-year-old actress, got her first two doses of MDMA from her hair dresser, Phillipa. He threw them in as a freebie to go with her \$120 perm and tint. That weekend she tried them with her boyfriend of three months.

"Bruce—that's my boyfriend—likes to smoke grass before we make love," she says. "But grass always made me self-conscious in bed. We've done coke together a few times and screwed like wild dogs. But this was different.

"After we swallowed the pills, we decided to take a bubble bath together. We were still in the tub when we got off. It came on in waves, like a tide—warm wonderful waves that ran all through our bodies. I was sitting with my back to Bruce while he straddled me and massaged my shoulders. It felt like all my bones had melted and our bodies had merged together. And the waves of good feeling kept rolling in.

"Then he tilted my head back and kissed me. It was the wettest, warmest kiss I'd ever had, and it seemed to go on forever. We got out of the bathtub and ran naked into the bedroom. Then we patled

THE OUTLAWED APHRODISIAC

The agony and
the ecstasy of Ecstasy

BY LELAND STREET

each other dry with towels and cuddled together on the bed. Usually when we make love, Bruce can't wait to get inside me. But this time everything went in slow motion. We necked like a couple of teenagers, kissing and cooing in each other's ears.

"It was the most intimate sex we'd ever had—and the funny thing is, we never had intercourse and neither of us came. We just stroked and fondled, kissed and licked each other for about two hours. And the whole time those waves of pleasure kept washing over us. Finally the tide moved out and we gradually came down. But for the next few days, there was a special warm glow between us."

Twenty years ago, Dr. Timothy Leary touted LSD as the most potent aphrodisiac of all time. "In a carefully prepared, loving LSD session," he boasted, "a woman will inevitably have several hundred orgasms." While Dr. Leary's testimonial was a masterpiece of promotional hyperbole, his extravagant claims were soon eclipsed by those of other drug apostles. When Quaaludes hit the scene in the early 70s, the conventional strategies and tactics of seduction became obsolete. Armed only with a simple white tablet, Nerd

ILLUSTRATION BY MARC TAFFET

Americanus could now stride confidently into sexual combat. Then came cocaine, guaranteed to reduce the most demure virgins to molten lust. Don Juan never had it so good.

But in the wake of each newly heralded "love drug" came the after-shocks of abuse and side effects—paranoia, addiction, fatal overdoses. The American readiness to embrace the inflated claims of every new entrant in the aphrodisiac sweepstakes underscores the consumer ethic of our quick-fix culture ("I want to get laid—tonight!"). And it speaks poignantly to our universal drive to transcend the normal bounds of sensual experience ("I want it to feel like heaven on earth—every time!").

And yet hope springs eternal. The newest contestant for the hearts and groins of orgiasts everywhere is Ecstasy. Even the name conjures rapturous encounters beyond the ken of mortal men. Its generic name is not so "high concept": MDMA, or methylene dioxy methamphetamine, to chemists. But MDMA is hardly a newly arrived rookie phenom. Invented in 1915 by an enterprising young chemist at the Merck pharmaceutical company, MDMA was targeted as an appetite suppressant for the would-be Flappers of that era. But for the next 60 years it languished on the back shelf.

Then in the mid 1970s psychologists noted the drug's potential therapeutic value in dealing with repressed emotions. Patients under the influence of MDMA could delve into traumatic events and feelings that might otherwise appear too threatening. Therapists found MDMA particularly effective in counseling couples, creating a mood of trust and safety that permitted uninhibited discussion. It was this aura of well being and inner peace that bol-

stered MDMA's notoriety as a "love drug" and its subsequent slang appellation: "Ecstasy." As reports of its more hedonistic aspects circulated, illicit supplies of Ecstasy began trickling down to the recreational drug scene. By the early 1980s, Ecstasy was in wide use on college campuses.

Enter the Drug Enforcement Agency. In 1984, Congress passed a law empowering the DEA to impose a one-year ban on previously unclassified substances that represent a clear and present danger. Last summer, the DEA chose Ecstasy as the first target of its new mandate. Over the strenuous objections of scientists and psychologists doing research on the drug, the DEA classified MDMA as a Schedule I drug, grouping it with heroin and LSD as having high abuse potential and no recognized medical use. The DEA argued that MDMA had not passed the rigorous battery of tests necessary for approval. But such testing is an expensive process, usually financed by a major drug company that hopes to market the product. In the case of MDMA, its patents have long since elapsed, so Merck could not retain exclusive rights to its manufacture and sale. And ever since the outbreak of underground Quaaludes abuse, pharmaceutical companies have been increasingly reluctant to invest in drugs that could attract unfavorable publicity.

The DEA's ruling comes up for review this fall. In the past year, doctors, scientists and psychologists have debated the relative merits of MDMA in seminars and colloquia. The Haight-Ashbury Medical Clinic recently conducted an interdisciplinary conference to examine all domains of MDMA use, from the laboratory to the courts to the bedroom. Researchers worry that MDMA will suffer the same fate as LSD, which

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was designated Schedule I in the mid-60s. Subsequent to the ban, LSD research money dried up and research grants became snarled in red tape. Richard Seymour, Haight-Ashbury's Training Director, notes: "The irony is that since its scheduling last year, MDMA has become increasingly available on the black market while legitimate research has ground to a halt. This is a potentially valuable drug that deserves further tests."

But while scientific investigation remains in limbo, recreational users continue to be lured by reports of ecstatic sex and emotional catharsis. Yet not everyone has a sexual response to the drug. Jonathan, a 32-year-old Wall Street bond trader, took Ecstasy for the first time while on a ski vacation in Aspen. "I met this woman in a bar one night and we agreed to ski together the next morning," he relates. "On the way up the chair lift she took out these two pills. I thought she was joking, but she smiled mischievously and swallowed hers, so I could hardly back out.

"By the time we got to the top, I was already feeling it. My legs were all warm and loose, and my heart was racing. She led the way down the slope and I followed. I'm a pretty good skier, but it had never felt so fluid before. It was like dancing a duet. It was the first run of the day and we waltzed down the mountain through a fresh foot of powder. We were like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

"When we got to the bottom, we were both flushed and sweating

hard. She was feeling dizzy so we went into the lodge and sat by the fire. We just sat there holding hands for the next couple of hours, talking and staring into the flame. I barely knew this woman, but soon we were telling each other our most private life histories. It was amazingly intimate—I trusted her completely.

"By noon we were straight again, but exhausted. We went back to my condominium and took a nap together. It was very friendly, and not at all sexual. We didn't even take off our clothes. We never became lovers, but we skied together every day for the rest of the week."

Many people find the emotional—rather than the sexual—content of the drug to be dominant. Jennifer, a 35-year-old marketing executive, was wary of trying MDMA. "I hadn't taken any strong drugs since college," she explains. "I had a couple of bad acid trips back then, and ever since I've stuck to wine or grass if I wanted to get high. I have this thing about control; the idea of being under the influence of a powerful drug scares me. But my husband Frank was all hot to try Ecstasy, and I didn't want him taking it with some other woman.

"For me, Ecstasy turned out to be the opposite of LSD. Instead of making me paranoid and introverted, I felt safe and secure. I knew I wouldn't do or say anything I'd regret later. I was totally relaxed, but lucid at the same time—very verbal, and totally in touch with my feelings. It was a very safe and loving experience. I found we could talk about things, about subtle problems in our mar-

riage, without feeling threatened or defensive. It was the first truly unedited conversation we'd had in years. And it was full of loving feelings that kept rising spontaneously to the surface.

"After all that open-hearted talk, we naturally felt like making love. We were both very aroused, but Frank couldn't get hard. I told him I didn't mind—and I didn't. It just felt so wonderful to have him holding me, to feel our bodies pressed together into one. I never wanted it to end. So when it started to wear off we were both overcome with sadness. It was like the sun setting on a beautiful day that you want to go on forever."

Some people's response is more explicitly sexual. "The entire high was like a prolonged, low-grade orgasm," says Marlene, a 25-year-old graduate student. "Every part of my body was hypersensitized. I felt like I was discovering the inside of my mouth for the first time—kissing had never been so sexy before. And there were circles of heat radiating from every part of my body—my breasts, my stomach, my crotch.

"When we fucked, I closed my eyes and poured my body into his, and felt him pouring into me. I was having such a wonderful time, I didn't even notice my orgasm sneaking up on me. Suddenly it was cresting over me like a tidal wave. And when I came, it felt like body-surfing an endless wave that never quite broke on the beach. It was incredible! The only problem was that coming brought me down. I was suddenly stone cold sober, which was a little depressing after flying so high."

"It's definitely an aphrodisiac," claims Jerry, a computer analyst. "It's not so much that it makes you horny. Who needs a drug for that? But it makes everything so sensual. All your senses are tuned in, so you can really focus on the other person—

which naturally is a turn-on. Also, since your lovemaking is less fixated on orgasm, you're not so preoccupied with trying to come or making someone else come. It takes the performance level out of sex and lets you concentrate on really making love to someone, instead of just getting them off.

"One of the reasons Ecstasy is such a turn-on is that it lets you verbalize the emotions that usually go unspoken. I kept telling my girlfriend how much I loved her, how beautiful she was, how wonderful she made me feel. Who doesn't get off on hearing that sort of thing?"

Amid the rave reviews, we heard an occasional dissenting opinion. "The first time I took Ecstasy," says Jeremy, a 30-year-old publicist, "I was in heaven. I thought, 'Finally, a drug that really feels good, that doesn't make me crazy or morose.' But the next morning my head felt like a cauliflower. I was tired and fuzzy for days. And the next time I took it, I didn't get nearly as high. Let's face it. There's no drug that's going to change your life or the way you live. Eventually you have to come back to earth and face yourself in the morning light."

So, in the final analysis, the question of whether Ecstasy is a true aphrodisiac remains unanswerable. Like all drugs, it acts differently on different people, and its effect is highly dependent on the environment and company you use it in. And of course the very meaning of the term "aphrodisiac" has engendered debate throughout the ages. What has endured as a constant is man's (and woman's) search for a means of heightening sexual potency and sensual enjoyment. ■

Leland Street is the pseudonym of an ex-Peace-Corps volunteer who now lives in New York.