

# STUNG

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Cannabis, Conspiracies & Cashing Out

A Memoir

By Brian Hogan

Gay. Stoned. Jailed. Robbed. Flipped. Awakened.  
TALES OF A MEDICAL MARIJUANA DISPENSARY OWNER.

THIS STORY IS TRUE  
NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED TO PROTECT THE **GUILTY**

## DEDICATION

I write this for you,  
the ones who have been in jail longer than a four day weekend,  
the ones who need cannabis for more than just laughs,  
the ones who've lost freedom,  
the ones who've lost respect,  
the ones who've lost their health,  
and the ones who've lost their lives,  
because of cannabis prohibition.

You are brave women and men, and I salute you.

In ancient Kundalini Yoga the sacred life cycle is this:

**G**enerate

**O**rganize

**D**estroy

(repeat)

God is not some entity outside of us, needing worship and craving praise.

G.O.D. is a guiding principle that has been unfolding for eternity.

There is no search for God,  
there is only recognizing it around us, within us, between us.

We are all a part of G.O.D.

Cannabis could help us understand that,  
if it weren't illegal and misunderstood.

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# Introduction

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There are casualties in any war.

The war on drugs is no different.

I was a recent college grad and goody two-shoes from Connecticut when I enlisted.

Embarking on a wild, eye-opening tour of duty in the California medical marijuana industry, I was stationed on the front lines for seven years.

This isn't just my story, it's also a story about my commanding officer, General Mary Jane herself.

“We're smarter than them, right?”

I barely heard my buddy Georgie's question as his third floor West Hollywood bachelor pad came back into focus. Georgie was a waiter slash actor slash director when we met, like almost everybody who moved to Los Angeles. He was a five foot ten inch Italian stallion with olive skin, green eyes, rare integrity and an adventurous spirit. We'd only known each other for about a year at this point, but this straight boy in a sea of homos would eventually become like a brother to me.

“Smarter than who?” the question sputtered from my lips like a car almost out of gas. I swallowed the rest of my Captain & Coke and passed the joint back to Georgie. He had rolled us a fatty out of some of the strongest California cannabis I'd ever had.

Georgie always had the best weed.

I'd been smoking pot on the daily for nearly a decade by then, but at that moment, I can honestly say I was the highest I had ever been.

*Damn this is powerful shit, what the fuck were we just talking about?*

“Dude, I said we’re smarter than all these fuckers making millions running pot shops, aren’t we?” He was adamant.

*Hell yeah we were*, I thought.

I’d been dealing the stuff on and off for years. This was a no-brainer.

“Hell yeah we are,” I said, feeling pumped up now.

“So let’s do that,” he continued. My hair stood on end.

I wasn’t sure if it was because of the weed, or because I loved the idea of making millions of dollars, or because something very profound was about to happen.

“Do what?” I already knew what he was going to say, but I listened with rapt attention.

“Let’s open a dispensary instead of bartending while we pursue our hollywood careers,” the words dropped matter-of-factly from his mouth.

It was one of those moments where the truth in his statement was so obvious and indisputable that we both wondered why we hadn’t thought of it before.

We hated bartending and we loved weed.

That moment was destiny and his crazy new idea would be our destiny fulfilled.

I could feel it.

Or else we might have just been bananas high, but we agreed right then to open a dispensary and trade in bartending for ‘bud-tending’ while we pursued our Hollywood dreams. So began my career as a California cannabis healer and a federal outlaw, early one lazy summer afternoon on a balcony in West Hollywood.

About nine months and ninety thousand hiccups later *Green Light Guys* was born. Our very own online compassionate care mobile delivery service.

A corner had been turned. Thanks to Georgie's vision and our hard work I was a business owner; nay, an entrepreneur.

I was successful.

I slung cannabis with the full blessing and support of the California State Government. I registered, got us a business license and a seller's permit. We paid taxes.

I was doing the same shit I did in college, but this time it was official, it was *legal*.

I was safe.

This was fucking awesome.

I would soon find myself getting arrested once, robbed at gunpoint twice, hiring and then firing a heroin addict, inspiring a hit HBO series about a weed delivery guy based loosely on my shop, fighting a hostile takeover and wearing a wire in a sting operation for the DEA.

I also came face to face with myself; my fears, my limits, my shortcomings and the rotting emotional corpse of a deadbeat dad. I grew up as a 'Christmas and Easter' Catholic, so I'd heard of God, but never met him. As I searched for meaning I discovered Evangelical Christianity in high school and served as a missionary in Africa for half a decade after graduation. I was born again. Then I went to college in my mid-twenties, where I quickly died again. I was introduced to Mary Jane and came out of the closet. I re-discovered that happiness is found in the pursuit of one's inescapable dreams. And I became more stoned than I even thought possible - for over a decade straight.

\* \* \*

The war on drugs wages on many fronts.

General Mary Jane also has a pretty wild backstory.

For starters, she's a whole slew of millennia old, first referenced in early China as both a powerful medicine and a recreational drug. She was used as medicine throughout the ages, in

Egypt, India, Ancient Greece and Rome. She was the original Big Pharma, but she was free and abundant. History bears this out.

Pot is mentioned in the bible, in Exodus, saying a cannabis oil was poured over folks to anoint them. The holiest of the holy have been getting high since before the crucifixion. Jesus used this same pot elixir to anoint his disciples and told them to go out into the villages and do the same. He knew if folks got high together they'd be much more likely to show compassion and gain spiritual insight. Maybe we should be following his example after all.

In ancient Chinese texts marijuana is sited as medicine for over a hundred ailments, including of all things, absent-mindedness.

It started appearing in medical text books in the 1600's.

George Washington grew hemp on his Mt. Vernon plantation for over thirty years. If the first ever leader of the free world can spend an entire lifetime getting high, I'm pretty sure we're going to be fine too.

History also tells us that Thomas Jefferson used marijuana; so did Napoleon. Even Queen Victoria used it, allegedly only for menstrual cramps though. The rulers of the planet were all a bunch of stoners. Heads of State in a state of intoxication.

And yet humanity is fine, still here.

The Declaration of Independence was written on hemp paper, that's why it's lasted until today. It also makes more sense to manufacture paper from a plant that only takes three months to grow, and can be re-grown with ease, rather than using trees, which take decades to be ready for harvest and are practically irreplaceable.

In the mid nineteenth century marijuana became mainstream medicine. It was officially added to the US Pharmacopeia and became a staple of every doctor's medicine bag. People were healthy and high, with the Government's blessing.

Even still, society seemed to be doing just fine.

During WWI the US Government grew over fifty thousand pounds of cannabis a year. The stalk itself is one of the hardest and most durable plant fibers as yet known to man. It was used on ships for rope and sails during the war because of its strength.

Right after the Great Depression the first medical marijuana dispensaries came into being; but they weren't called that. Cannabis extract was being sold in pharmacies.

Only in 1937 did humanity really start freaking out about pot. This was no accident, it was a corporate designed and government sponsored propaganda campaign lead by one Harry Anslinger. The people were told that weed could make you violent; that black men and Mexicans get high and lose their minds, only to end up beating and raping women. Anyone who has ever tried pot can verify that is utter horse shit. If anything, marijuana makes humans more docile, friendly and laid back. I don't hear stories of men smoking too much weed and going home to beat their wives, it's the drink that does that. You know, the intoxicator that's legal.

Marijuana has been sidelined from our cultural zeitgeist for over eighty years, due to the Marijuana Tax Act. But strictly speaking it wasn't made illegal. The government didn't prohibit pot, it was too soon after the obvious failure of alcohol prohibition to attempt that. Nobody was going to go for that again, and the captains of industry knew this. But marijuana was a threat to too many industries of the day, it had to be stopped somehow.

Marijuana was known to be a powerful medicine, which was a threat to the emerging pharmaceutical industry.



Marijuana is a fancy word for hemp. Hemp was used to make paper, construction materials, clothes, and more. The newly invented material 'plastic' would have been bankrupt before it even got started had hemp been allowed to remain a viable contender. A machine had just been invented to allow for mass production of hemp, something that was previously impossible due to its strength and robustness. Dupont, the inventor of plastic, wasn't going to let that fly. Even though plastic is toxic and hemp is safe, plastic somehow ended up everywhere while hemp is still barely legal. Do the math.

Enough corrupt and common interests aligned to make certain marijuana wasn't allowed to blossom into the miracle plant that could single-handedly solve many of the world's problems.

Problems are profitable, peace and prosperity aren't.

The Marijuana Tax Act was conceived and passed in 1937. This new law didn't prohibit pot, it just taxed the shit out of the farmers growing it; so it simply wasn't worth growing anymore. A subtle and invisible defacto prohibition began, under the guise of heavy taxes.

Despite their own trumped up hemp taxes the government subsidized farmers to grow the stuff during WWII, they needed that durable fiber for their fleets again. When the chips are down hemp is safe, I guess. Fucking ridiculous.

In 1964, THC was discovered and isolated in the lab. In 1968, to capitalize on this discovery, the Federal Government started a secret grown operation in Mississippi. I can't have a few seedlings under a light in my bedroom closet without the risk of losing my freedom, but the feds get to have a whole secret farm. I see how it is.

Only in 1971 did marijuana actually become full-on illegal. We have Richard Nixon to thank for that. That incompetent crook put marijuana on schedule one, declaring it had no

medical value. It has remained there ever since. Then Nixon dealt marijuana's fatal blow, in an open press conference. Milking the people for all the fear he could, he declared a 'war on drugs.'

"Wars are scary, we've got to do something," was the predictable outcry from a successfully fear-mongered populace.

Two years later the DEA was created.

Thankfully, three years after that Amsterdam happened. The people of the Netherlands started coming to their senses first, and tourism boomed.

In the eighties, Big Pharma invented Marinol, or as I like to call it 'fake pot in a pill', and surprise surprise, the bought-and-paid-for FDA approved it. It has some pretty hefty side effects and doesn't work that well, according to the majority of patient reports. Pot, on the other hand, is non-lethal, and boasts being in a great mood and craving snacks as the only side effects.

In the nineties, scientists discovered we have cannabinoid receptors in our brains. We have a part of our brain that is only activated by cannabis, called the endocannabinoid system.

Cannabis and humanity, quite literally, were made for each other.

Like the folks in Amsterdam, more and more people started coming to their senses. In 1993, the American Medical Association unanimously agreed that marijuana should be reclassified off of schedule one, citing obvious medical value. The doctors are saying it's medicine again. What more proof does society need?

In 1996, California became the first state to legalize medical marijuana. Since then, the majority of the states have followed suit.

Still, non-violent offenders waste away in jail. Promising students have their futures ruined over simple possession of a plant. Prisons are over crowded with people who mean us no

harm. People we'd normally be friends with. The people who bring the weed to the dinner party.

The war on drugs still wages.

The casualties keep piling up.

In 2003, I started selling dimes in college to make rent money and smoke for free. I met good people, peaceful people, from all walks of life. I kept slinging in Los Angeles in my early days to make ends meet. My clients were the salt of the earth, not a violent son of a bitch in the entire lot. I owned and operated a legal cannabis dispensary for five years. I saw the California medical marijuana industry up close and personal. Cancer patients thanked me for what I did. Parents of epileptic children thanked me. My eyes were being opened.

I saw the truth.

It's not just that cannabis isn't a bad thing; it's that it's a really great thing!

Meanwhile, cancer sufferers still die; epileptics still seize; and chemo patients still can't eat or smile.

Humanity has the cure for all of that and more.

But there's no money in it.

So the war on drugs still rages and the casualties keep piling up.

I was almost one of them.

Part One:  
**GENERATE**

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# 1. Sting Me Once,

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They say lightening doesn't strike twice.

They don't say that about sting operations.

I used to say my life was charmed, but after a year in LA I was beginning to wonder.

I got stung for the first time back in 2007, just one year after my move to California. I graduated from college in Ohio and moved to Hollywood to pursue my life-long dream of making it as a screenwriter/director in the glamorous world of show business.

Two of my creative partners from college, Opal and Wanda, arrived a year before I did. Opal, a striking caramel skinned beauty who turned the heads of men and women alike, said so far LA had been torture. Wanda, a cute blonde stoner chick with a happy disposition and an LA native, loved everything about the place. Opal got a job as an extra while waiting for me to get there. Wanda lived off royalties from a Cheetos commercial she did ten years earlier and smoked massive amounts of weed. Both of their lives sounded amazing to me as I finished out my last semester in Ohio. I dreamt of Hollywood since I was a child, and hearing about their adventures had me chomping at the bit to get out there and have my own.

Opal was working for an 'inflatable crowd' company. In Hollywood, even the extras are being replaced by, literally, inflatable crowds. For large shots in stadiums and the like, it happens to be cheaper to invent, manufacture and fill a fake inflatable crowd with air than it is to hire that many actual people.

Upon my arrival in California, Opal and I founded Novice Hack Entertainment, a production company that would one day become failed business number one. But for now, it was a life-long dream forming into a reality. In those first few months in LA before I found my niche of like minded people it felt like everyone I met was inflatable. Mostly shallow, easily puffed up and manipulated by flattery, and thoroughly invested in their own lives. The blow up dolls passing for people in Los Angeles didn't even make good eye contact, unless it was with a mirror.

I started to feel like an extra in my own life.

Set dressing in my own fucking story.

Was moving across the country to pursue a career in Hollywood with no money and no plan really a good idea? All I had going for me was a certainty that I was *supposed to* do this, and after a few months of the grind even that was beginning to fade. I had no plan whatsoever. I was glad Opal and Wanda were there to soften the landing. Familiar faces in a sea of vapid self-interest meant everything to me.

Also, Wanda was my only weed connect, so I saw her pretty much daily.

Finding a job in a good bar or restaurant was next to impossible in those days. Throngs of new actor slash waiter's migrated to LA each year, and they all needed jobs. And most of them were hotter than me. Way hotter. Some restaurants required headshots, just like the movie studios. Some even called their interview process "auditions." I had definitely arrived in Hollywood and I felt thoroughly under-qualified to be there.

I was flat broke and far from home.

After five weeks of half-hearted job hunting and post-college depression I got lucky. I was one of only three souls fortunate enough to tend bar at a coveted Beverly Hills hot spot right smack in the center of restaurant row called "The Stinky Bulb - A Garlic Tavern". I landed the

job that first summer in LA and quickly became the bar manager Omar's right hand. With things like Garlic Martinis and Garlic Ice Cream on the menu, not to mention every entree being drenched in the stuff, it's easy to understand how I, a marathon-running, goal-driven thirty year old homo, only a stones throw away from the gay mecca of West Hollywood managed to stay single for the entire two years I worked there.

After ten months of stinking up the Stinky Bulb I got a call from my manager's manager, "Brian, would you be so good to come in early tonight?" Maximo, the austere Russian G.M. bellowed eloquently into the phone. You'd think one can't bellow with eloquence, but somehow Maximo could.

It was Friday around lunch time, so at that point I was on joint number three with Wanda, my favorite couch potato partner and a bigger pot head than me. We were currently balls deep into our fifth episode of *Boston Legal*, pajamas on, with a pizza en route.

*What time was it anyway?*

I had to quickly calculate how long it would take me to come down from my high and not seem too stoned if I came into work thirty minutes earlier like Maximo requested.

Okay, only 1:30, I don't have to be at work until 5:00, thirty minutes early makes that 4:30, which is three solid hours from now. That's plenty of time. I can still smoke two more joints and take thirty minutes to collect myself, douse with cologne and eye drops, and show up to whatever this mysterious meeting was about, looking Friday fresh.

When I pulled up, Maximo was waiting for me in the valet area outside, with a dollop of cocaine predictably hanging on the end of his nose. He was a huge coke head, and despite the avalanches he'd leave in his mustache or on his tie, he thought it was his little secret.

Damn, does this mean he's going to be in one of his more 'talkative' moods? My heart sank. How long was this going to take and what could it be about?

He lead me through the front of the house where the gaggle of girls working the host stand gave me strange second glances. Then we rounded a corner into the kitchen and down the long hallway to his office, where members of the kitchen staff looked grave or averted their gaze from me altogether.

*What the hell was going on? Did someone die? Was I fired? Do I seem paranoid? Oh my god, do I look paranoid?*

We arrived at his office and sat across the desk from each other, the cocaine crumb in his nose both mocking and distracting me.

*If I'm gonna get fired, can I at least get a bump before I go?*

Finally, after seconds that seemed like entire shifts the Coke Head Russian spoke, "Brian, I very upset."

*Fuck, here it is, I'm gonna be fired and this hopped up asshole is going to deliver the news and then go do rails, not giving it or me a second thought. I'm fucked, totally fucked. What did I do?*

I guess they don't like their bartenders coming into work stoned after all. But I'm not your typical stoner; I get shit done. I'm friendly, social, a picture of grace. If he couldn't see that, then fuck him.

He continued, "Omar left cash drawer out last night. He get too drunk on job and I can no have those kind of mistake anymore."

*Omar? He's upset with Omar! This is great news.*



Omar, the perpetually drunk bar manager, and my immediate supervisor, had left a thousand dollars in cash just sitting out. No way me being stoned at work rates higher than that. I'm home free.

“I demote him and want make you bar manager. You my guy. I need you step up.”

Okay, what just happened? I'm not fired, that much I got. But I was still pretty stoned, so I thought he said I got a promotion too. That can't be right.

“So, how that sound?” the Russian Coke Head raised his shoulders impatiently after what must have been too long of a pause before answering him, or even reacting at all. I was completely stunned. The cocaine crumb was still hanging there at the tip of his ruddy nose, held in place by a tuft of nostril hair, but I was beginning to find that amusing now that I wasn't being fired.

“Yes, that sounds good” I rejoined the conversation.

We went over all my new perks and my new raise in pay. I would get my pick of the schedule now. That meant all the good-money shifts. I was thrilled. It sucked for Omar, but the moron left a wad of cash sitting on the counter, and besides, this was my day to celebrate; my moment in the garlic laden sun.

I chugged a few more stealthy mojitos than usual behind the bar that night. I was the manager now, who's gonna stop me? Besides, I was just promoted, I deserved to celebrate.

By 9:00pm the bar was full, as per usual on a Friday night. I was making mojitos and garlic martinis left and right. Those were our two specialty drinks and I knew my customers would tip better when they were drunk, so I went heavy on the rum and light on the crushed up leaves. I slid one down to Debbie, my favorite regular, a loud and friendly black woman who worked as a Unit Production Manager for real honest to goodness Hollywood movies. I had no

idea what a Unit Production Manager was or what she actually did on set, but she was a riot who made her presence known when she walked in. Her drinks were always doubly strong and half the price. Tipping well got you all kinds of perks. We were laughing about something when suddenly the Russian popped his snow dotted face around the corner looking grave, “Brian, come with me please.”

*Buzz kill; what did he want now?*

This must be about some important bar manager duties I have to learn, some kind of bar manager initiation maybe. Or perhaps they had a congratulatory cake waiting for me in the back office where all the other managers and executive types would be waiting, smiling and ready to pat me on the back, shake my hand and welcome me into their elite executive fold. Maybe there’s an executive washroom and Coke Head is about to bestow upon me my personal washroom key. As I was trying to determine which of these great events was about to occur we rounded the corner, and standing there at the end of the long hallway were two uniformed police officers and one of my bar patrons from moments ago.

*What the fuck was this?*

Are they gonna bust me for being stoned at work after all? Or had someone reported me for knocking back a few extra mojitos that night? At this point I wasn’t even paranoid anymore, because I was drunk, but I was intrigued.

Maximo introduced me to the two pretty boy Beverly Hills cops, cocaine littering his lapels like so much dandruff, with a simple “this is him.”

*This is him! What the fuck did that mean? If you sell me out for smoking some measly Mary Jane in a state where it’s legal for medical use then I’m sure as hell gonna tell the 5-0 to search you for an eight ball, so don’t*

*mess with me you red-faced Russian mother fucker! And blow your goddamn fucking nose while you're at it; I mean come on.*

Suddenly officer Blue-Eyed-Statue-of-David was in my face,

“Sir, you served this young lady a beverage,” he was like a sexy robotic Ken Doll.

*So fucking what?* I thought.

“Yes, that’s right,” I said, disarmed by his beauty, with that last mojito kicking in.

This was before I knew better that you keep your mouth shut around cops. I was half indignant and half flirty-homo, so I definitely said too much that night. It was finally explained to me that she was a decoy, a shill, sent undercover into bars to see which ones of us would fall into their trap and serve a minor. So this is what it felt like to be entrapped; to be the victim of a sting operation. I had been stung by Alcohol Beverage Control (ABC). I was outraged. Not only did this supposedly 19-year old sell-out narc look like she was pushing thirty-five, with the nose hair and female mustache to match, but nobody under fifty pretty much ever came into this garlic dump. Except for the rapper and shitty tipper Exhibit, this clientele was decidedly geriatric. The deck had been stacked against me!

This was some bullshit.

They stood me next to the mannish thirty-five looking teenage shill and made us pose for a picture.

“And what’s this for?” I said to Robo Cop with the faggiest mean girl attitude I could muster.

“Evidence,” Sexy Ken Doll replied flatly.

I turned to the decoy narc and whispered, “what do you get out of this?”

Her simple reply stunned me, “It’s a job.”

*Fuck you it's a job. You're just a sell-out bitch, I thought to myself. Well at least I still have my promotion.*

On the way back to the bar area to finish my shift the Coke Head dropped this little nugget,

“You know about before, we can't do that now. I going have keep Omar for manager. You understand.”

No, I didn't understand.

When Opal and Wanda found out what happened later that night, they laughed their asses off. I didn't find it the least bit funny.

I was promoted and then demoted in four hours flat.

That's only the first time I got stung by a bullshit sting operation.

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## 2. Novice, Hack

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I didn't know anything about running a business.

I was an artist, a dreamer. In short, I was a flake.

Not long after landing the job at The Stinky Bulb I became a business owner for the first time. Opal and I said, in college, that we'd start a production company when we made it to LA, so that's what we did.

For reasons that are beyond me, Opal and I decided we had to register with the Secretary of State in California, get the articles of incorporation necessary to have a legit business on file, and pay crazy taxes and fees.

All of this so we could put "A Novice Hack Entertainment Production" at the top of the opening titles in our own movies. We didn't need to open a business, we just needed to keep making movies. But we were young, dumb and idealistic. We also had our egos and wanted it 'to be official' so we jumped through more hoops than a dancing circus bear.

We both had moms that were being supportive in their own way.

My mom would read drafts of my screenplays and give me detailed notes.

Opal's mom thought that if she was ever going to make it as an actress in Hollywood she would need a better smile and more perfect teeth. She sent Opal five thousand dollars and earmarked it 'for veneers'.

I wasn't sure which was better, a mom devoted to spending time critiquing my art or a mom who sent cold hard cash. I could have used five thousand dollars.

Our company, Novice Hack Entertainment never made more than a few thousand dollars in a fiscal year. I don't mean income, I mean total revenue for the whole company. So Uncle Sam basically laughed when we tried to pay taxes the next spring.

He insisted we keep it. Thank God.

Opal had a wild streak of mischief in her, so when April Fool's Day rolled around each year her friends knew to be extra careful. Her first LA boyfriend Terrance didn't know any better. He had just recently started directing porn films in the valley, a consummate Los Angeles cliché. Opal was in love with him though, so she took it in stride. When April Fool's Day rolled around, she told Terrance she was pregnant. She liked to have fun.

Terrance was stunned.

"April Fool's," Opal blurted out, breaking into hysterics at her own joke.

Terrance became furious. He told her that wasn't funny, and how could she do such a thing? Then, when she was good and sorry,

"April Fool's," he revealed. He wasn't mad at all.

They were both joking and laughing. Two peas in a pod.

Opal told me later she felt lucky to be in such a strong and healthy relationship.

A few moments later Terrance became grave,

"Now that I'm directing porn I can see what's out there, and I'm sorry to say Opal, but you're just not sexually adventurous enough for me anymore. I want to break up."

Opal started laughing. Good one. Terrance was really getting into the April Fool's Day spirit. He just looked at her.

"Wait, you're joking right?" Opal almost fell for it.

"No, I'm not, I want to break up."

She cracked up laughing again. He was good. He really committed.

“No seriously,” he remained stoic.

She cracked up harder, her sides were hurting. This was fucking hilarious.

“I’m not kidding Opal, I’m sorry,” Terrance wanted her to understand.

Oh, this was real. The porn director didn’t find her sexually adventurous enough.

Terrance was the real joke.

He was the first boyfriend Opal had been completely faithful to, and he would also be the last. She felt like the April fool now.

We both craved a distraction. We decided what we needed most was a camera of our own so we could shoot anything we wanted whenever we wanted. That was the whole point of this thing after all, to make movies. But we were flat broke.

Opal declared her teeth were fine and used the 5K her mom sent for veneers to get us our very first company camera instead. Sorry Opal’s mom.

When the camera arrived we brought it to Wanda’s house, because I figured, if we were going to learn how this thing worked, I might as well be stoned. Opal didn’t smoke pot but she knew there was no stopping me. Wanda was more than happy to oblige, packing up bowls as we unpacked our camera.

We tried to put the camera together. Opal grew more and more impatient as I grew more and more stoned. She hated to follow directions as much as I hated sobriety. Finally getting the hang of this thing, we powered the camera on. I surged with excitement.

There was a slow motion feature that blew both our minds at the time. Then we discovered HD. Opal and Wanda both wanted to be filmed and giggled, asking “How do we look in High Def?” High Def was just becoming a thing then, so we were all beside ourselves.

We really were film makers now.

After that day, Wanda expressed her interest in joining up with Novice Hack. I was all for it. We'd been friends for years, worked together in college and got along great. Opal was more hesitant. The two of them had a more cat-fighty vibe in college and as Opal put it,

"I'm just not really sure what expertise she can bring to the table besides her over-priced cinema degree with honors and a ten year old Cheetos commercial." Opal was queen of the zingers.

But we forged ahead. Wanda joined our ranks and Novice Hack was fully formed.

For two years I lived the life of a struggling artist. We dabbled in drugs (besides pot, that's just a plant), mostly at Wanda's urging, and started to live the California dream.

In California everything slows way down. I was used to Connecticut and Ohio, where the turning of the seasons marks the passing of time, each harsh winter engraving another year onto your soul. But time seemed to stand still in California.

The plants are dusty from the lack of rain in LA. The air is heavy with smog, making you feel almost encased. Rock and sand make up the monotonous landscape. It is virtually treeless, except for artificially transplanted palm trees, tropical refugees hung up over the boulevards like fancy drapes to help spruce up the place. In Hollywood, even the landscape is just set dressing.

Opal and I were very work focused. Wanda would get us an eight ball, not the kind that told fortunes, but the kind that costed one. Wanda, Opal and I would snort lines and endlessly talk about ideas for shows and projects.

I was just a dabbler then.



I was single, but I didn't want to get dumped by a hack porn director one day like Opal, so I had some work to do. I decided I had to become more adventurous sexually, anything to break up the monotony.

\* \* \*

One Friday afternoon, I was finishing up a shift at The Stinky Bulb when a sexy young 20-something hottie came in with his mother. I knew instantly he was gay even though he didn't have any of the attention grabbing flamer qualities like some of the flashier mo's among us do. I knew because we can somehow just tell. As if we have some kind of evolutionary adaptation that allows us to find each other in the storm of life so we aren't marginalized alone. Like the signal sent between flocks of birds to let them know where to migrate. 'This way, gay, this way. Follow the rainbow flags'. We call it gaydar.

We made eye contact before the hostess sat him and his mother at their table.

In my world, eye contact with another mo usually means we are having sex next.

So I hung out with the girls at the host stand and waited for his inevitable return to use the bathroom. Right on cue he came back to the lobby and entered the men's room. We locked eyes again.

Game fucking on.

I followed him in. We stood next to each other at the urinals, dicks out. I looked at his glory unashamedly. He turned it towards me. I sank to my knees and began to go to town. Another patron could have walked in on us at anytime.

Who cared? My shift was almost over.

After a few moments he pulled me to my feet and dropped to his knees. He returned the favor. Wordless, we zipped up. He rejoined the table with his mother. He wasn't sitting in my

section but I brought them some fresh breadsticks, for kicks. We both smiled, his mother had no idea why.

We never actually spoke. I clocked out and went home.

I was supposed to be making movies.

\* \* \*

It was a balmy, breezy summer day in Los Angeles every day of the year. The morning I started slinging green there was no different. This was a city whose majesty and allure lay in her reputation alone, because, like any Vegas go-go dancer, she looked much much worse when you got right up close. Her seedy underbelly had been my home for about a year now.

Novice Hack wasn't making us any real money. We wanted to make films because we loved it, not because we got paid to do it; though we all yearned for that dam to finally break and prosperity to rain down upon us.

It had been a month since I was promoted to bar manager at the garlic hub, a position I held for exactly four hours and twenty minutes before being stung and demoted back to lowly bartender. I was still chaffing from the quickest rise to power and subsequent fall from grace in the history of restaurant management when Wanda handed me a fatty that her roommate's brother had rolled for us.

Inhale. Cough like crazy. Inhaler. Relax a little.

I have asthma, so the coughing part was a given, but that didn't stop me. I had my trusty inhaler.

The doobie floated around the intimate gathering, to Lydia, Wanda's roommate, her brother Dirk, over to Wanda and then back to me.

Inhale deeply again. Cough again. Inhaler again. Relax a little bit more.

Puff. Pass. Inhaler. Relax. Repeat.

This was one of my favorite rituals, especially when I was feeling low. Novice Hack was making no money and sucking plenty of time. I seemed to have reached as far as I could go at The Stinky Bulb. Single, broke, losing hope in my dreams and cursed with perpetual garlic breath thanks to my only source of reliable income, I was coming to my wits' end.

Inhale. Bogart the fattie this time. Inhale again, pretending I don't see my friends glaring. Cough up a lung. Use inhaler again. Feel great, for a few minutes more anyway.

I needed a better job, or a higher paying one, at least.

Dirk knew a guy who wanted to 'move more weight' on the west side, where Wanda lived. She had the connection and I had the experience from my college days, so a modest side business was born. Wanda and I started flipping pot that weekend.

The two of us drove around in her Saab, windows up or down, it didn't matter, smoking doobie after doobie while delivering pot to our friends.

We weren't criminals, we were just having some fun.

But we weren't making any movies either.

It was time for a change.

So I quit my day job.

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## 3. God No

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I knew that quitting the Stinky Bulb was the right thing to do.

I was ready for my unemployment.

I had entire seasons of some of my favorite TV shows crammed into the DVR. Wanda and I were moving a few ounces a month, so I was smoking for free and making cash money. Novice Hack was renting Opal's camera regularly, which paid a good chunk of my rent. I also saved some money during my time at Chez Garlic so I wasn't in any hurry to get another job. I could spend time writing, and making art. A new job would come.

I knew then to trust the timing of the universe.

I'd learned at least that much from my decade-long stint as a born again Christian.

\* \* \*

I accepted Jesus as my lord and savior when I was a freshman in high school. I was fifteen, awkward, closeted and fatherless. My mom, sister and I had just moved back to Connecticut from Massachusetts, where my mom had just completed her master's degree. So I didn't know anybody anymore.

A brand new freshman face, in a brand new conservative town, in very big high school.

I needed to find my niche, and fast.

I lived next door to a Jesus freak, Danny, who was always nice to me. He invited me to his youth group meetings, where I met other kids my age who were also nice to me. I noticed that once the other new kids accepted Jesus into their hearts there was a whole new level of camaraderie achieved. So naturally, I accepted Jesus into my heart. I had become good at

adapting to new situations in order to be accepted. We moved around so much that it became second nature, an involuntary habit, to ingratiate myself to people. I'd do the expedient thing in order to stay part of the group, rather than the thing I wanted. For example, I wanted to fuck other high school boys, but instead I pretended to have crushes on girls.

My plan was working well.

By junior year I was a youth group leader, with a thriving social group. I was even starting to believe Jesus was the real deal. Granted, I hadn't exposed myself to any of the worlds other great religions or philosophies, and if any of my male friends knew how often I watched them undress in the locker room they'd say I was damned straight to hell for being an abomination. But such is the certainty of youth. I felt like a part of something bigger than myself. I was helping to bring Jesus to my high school. I wasn't *gay*, I was struggling with homosexuality. And besides, that was a secret.

I was *saving* people.

I liked how it felt to save people from themselves. Hopefully if I saved enough of them God would look the other way on my whole wanting-to-suck-cock thing, and let me into heaven for good behavior.

After senior year I decided I wasn't going to college, I was going to become a missionary. I had some kissing-up to God to do. I had done what I could to save my high school, now it was time to go and save the world.

Before I left, my sister Kate offered me cannabis for the very first time.

*Why not? It's just a plant and I can always ask God for forgiveness.*

I'll try anything once. We were hanging out in Kate's first apartment, a slum by any measure. Kate was twenty and stepped out on her own, to the ghetto. We cracked open some

beer and Kate packed me my very first bowl of marijuana, in an apple, jerry-rigged to function as a pipe.

I started to get stoned for the first time in my life. A few minutes later,

“Take me to the hospital,” I pleaded from the kitchen floor.

There were about five people there in Kate’s roach motel. Nobody was taking me seriously.

“I’m serious,” I insisted, unable to move my arms or legs, “if you don’t get me to the hospital I’m going to die.”

My face was pressed firmly to the cool linoleum in Kate’s tiny kitchen, and the walls were bending in around me. This pot had to be laced with something. I felt like I was on a fucking acid trip. The whole stoned and indifferent gallery of rogues just chuckled.

*Goddamnit, I really am going to die here. Who’s the weak link? I have to convince someone to help me; my life depends on it.*

The air was sparkling with color, the room was waving and contorting, and I was barely able to drag my body across the floor. I needed to get someone on board to help save my life.

“Belinda,” I whispered urgently, face still hugging floor, “you have to help me.”

Mercifully, she came to sit by me, to calm me down.

*I don’t need to calm down, you need to get riled up. Fuck, this is it. I’m going to die at age eighteen, from my very first time trying drugs in my sister’s run-down tenement. Fucking typical.*

\* \* \*

One time during her brief four months living in gangland came a loud knocking at her front door.

It was 5:30am.

This was before cellphones and before sunrise. She didn't have a landline hooked up yet. How would she protect herself? You had to have a key to get onto this floor so who the hell was knocking on her door at this hour?

“State police, open up.”

Oh, okay. Wait what? Kate looked through the peep hole, it was true.

She looked around at the bongos and bud everywhere. And the beer. She wasn't even drinking age. She was so fucked. Did mom call them? Not knowing what else to do she opened the door.

The officers saw the obvious and damning evidence of her crimes and said, “we're not here for that.”

The broke down shoebox she called home used to be a stash house for wanted gang members and the cops were doing a statewide raid on the Latin Kings. They did a quick search of her apartment. One officer asked if she knew the landlords really well; they were huge drug dealers.

Oh she knew them, alright. She got her pot from them.

“No, not really,” she lied through her teeth.

“I'm so glad you lied to the cops,” I told her years later.

“I was terrified,” she confessed, “but I ain't no snitch.”

As they were leaving, one officer asked this petite and innocent looking white girl rhetorically, “did you move here to try and prove a point to your parents?”

When you weren't distracted by the sound of gun fire in the distance or the chalk outlines in the parking lot, this grimy 1970's deco apartment made a pretty good first home. Especially if you were high all the time, like Kate tended to be.

\* \* \*

Belinda was still sitting beside me on the kitchen floor. My head was splitting open, I could feel it, and colors were pouring out into the room.

I whispered to Belinda gravely so nobody else could hear, “please, just take me to the hospital, you have to believe me, otherwise I am going to die and that will be on you.”

I was bleeding fucking rainbows.

“You’re gonna be fine,” Belinda assured me, stroking my hair like an angelic nurturer.

“You’re fat,” I slurred with venom from the kitchen floor.

Even tripping my balls off during my first time ever smoking pot my biting wit remained intact. Belinda, definitely overweight and the fattest one in attendance, tried to waive this off. I was high out of my mind after all.

The rogues gallery were suddenly paying attention.

I persevered, angry that I was not being rushed to the E/R, “not jolly or happy fat, not cute fat, just plain old fat, fat. You’re just fat.”

I managed to spew this vitriol out to the one person trying to help me. Even with the melting walls and colors swirling in the air I could still be a dick. So I must be okay, right?

Everyone in Kate’s apartment was pleading with me to shut up; I was being too mean. I’ve been pleading to be taken to the hospital for what feels like a decade, but now suddenly everyone was paying attention to me. Thank god.

“Now can somebody take me to the goddamn fucking hospital, please?”

In short order, Kate exiled me to her bedroom where I slept the whole unfortunate event off. I’m not sure if I was just a light-weight or if that pot was laced with something, but a few beers and a few hits out of a home-made apple pipe had a profoundly psychedelic effect on my teenage mind.



I was a Christian and this stuff was Satan, I concluded.

I wouldn't smoke pot again for six years.

I prayed about my direction in life. I needed some kind of change, and I needed to get away from Connecticut, away from the devil's weed and away from myself. I discovered a program called Mercy Ships. They helped the poor and needy in African nations, removing tumors and cataracts, building schools, teaching first aid skills, and most importantly, bringing the good news of Jesus to folks who would have otherwise withered away and died in hell, unsuspecting and unsaved.

We didn't have two extra pennies to scrape together in my family, so the idea of joining an organization that cost a few hundred a month to volunteer was more than absurd. It was out of the question.

A friend told me about her evangelical church, and how they took an offering for her missionary trip. I approached my pastor with my Mercy Ships idea. The church held a fundraiser, and a bake sale, easily raising all the cash I needed and more. Less than a year after graduation I was at JFK airport, about to board a plane to Amsterdam and leave the country for the first time.

"I love you, Brian, I'm so proud of you," my mom gushed, tears in her eyes.

She didn't have Jesus in her heart, but I overlooked that and loved her anyway.

"Mom, stop, you're gonna make me cry."

We hugged and I boarded my first ever international flight. I never expected to leave Connecticut. I was from a poor family, so that just wasn't in the cards.

\* \* \*

Living on a nautical vessel took some getting used to. I was crammed into a giant metal tub with four hundred crew members from over forty different cultures. The terminology alone had my head throbbing.

The ramp to enter an exit is called a gangway. The kitchen is really the galley. Left is called 'port', and right is called 'starboard'. Windows are called port holes, even if they are on starboard side. Forward is 'fore', back is 'aft', and if you ask the British, the word for dumb is really 'daft.' The maritime slang was nothing compared to the foreign English the English were speaking. A bathroom was a loo, or if you were being fancy, a water closet. What we called lemonade they called lemon juice. What we called lemon juice they called lemon extract. If you happened to be horny they called you randy, and if you were a fag who smoked they'd offer you fags. Bloody meant fucking, and to fuck meant to shag.

I shared a small cabin with four other guys. I cracked open my bible that first night, to quiet my mind and read some comforting words. Jeremiah 29,

*"For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. In those days when you pray, I will listen."*

I liked the sound of that. I wanted hope and a future. I wanted to fix my broken sexuality and learn to love the ladies. And it was good to know someone was listening.

*"If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. I will be found by you," says the Lord. "I will end your captivity and restore your fortunes."*

Okay, that sounded good too. I traveled all the way to fucking Africa, surely that counted as 'wholeheartedly'. I will shed my perverse nature. Then, and only then, will I find good fortune.

*"I will gather you out of the nations where I sent you and will bring you home again to your own land."*

Okay, great. Once I heal from gayness, I'll get to go home. And from the sound of it, become rich.

Turns out you can't heal from gayness. But you can heal from self-loathing.

I guiltily fucked every closeted 20-something pastor's son I could get my hands on. I helped the poor and needy, sure, but I helped myself to a little something too. I might have been in the closet, but I had a walk-in closet, plenty of room for two. Despite the narrow-mindedness of the church, I was exposed to deep love, varied cultures, and unfathomable poverty in myriad West African nations.

\* \* \*

With the help of God's chosen people I spent the next three and a half years traveling around Africa, Asia and Europe, visiting over thirty countries and spreading the good news of Jesus love. I saw sight restored to the blind, health restored to the sick, and hope restored to entire villages. The ship's crew was also full of West African Christians. I worked along side them to bring prosperity and technology to their people. After those three years I never considered myself poor again. I realized true poverty was something we didn't know anything about in America. I was on a free ride to see the world and rack up experience, all while doing God's work.

I was a healer who couldn't quite figure out how to heal himself.

I started to feel like my life was charmed. Except for the whole pretending-to-be-something-I-wasn't thing.

Masks are hard as stone and don't come off easy. I'd been wearing mine since becoming a Christian almost a decade ago, or maybe for my whole lifetime. I was looking out through eye holes covered in thick glass, helpless. I lived my life like I was at a masquerade ball. I felt out of

place in my own skin. That feeling lived in the pit of my stomach, because I suffered, but couldn't share it with anyone. People generally don't like to think about suffering, their own or anybody else's. My particular sin was the worst abomination of them all. So I kept the heavy mask in place and swayed to the beautiful music. I never learned the real identity of my dancing partners, and nobody ever learned my real identity either.

\* \* \*

After three long, hot, self-suffocating years I had two more weeks left in Africa. Two more weeks with heavy wet air and dusty lungs. Fourteen more days of staring poverty in the face. I was ready to retreat. I was ready to spend money frivolously in convenient forgetfulness. I was ready for good pizza and reliable air conditioning.

I tried to muster up the heart to play with naked, mud-crust-ed children, and sit with the fat lady who smiled ear to ear when she sold me a can of Coke. It hadn't hit me that this would be my last time in Africa, probably for a long while. It had been my home for almost three years, on and off, but I just felt so ready to leave. I felt the absence of entertainment, autumn winds, and junk food.

I wanted to soak up the remnants of my time there. I wanted to splay my heart open and live life fully. Instead I laid sweating, in my boxers, in my B-deck cabin bunkbed. Immobile in the sweltering heat and the oppressive secrecy. I didn't want college, but after more than three years of denying my true nature to fit in, any change was a good change.

\* \* \*

A few months later, during my first semester of college, I was presented with the opportunity to smoke pot for the second time. I remembered the hallucinations and the cold linoleum floor from six years ago, and I hated the thought of that happening again.

But I also felt drawn to Mary Jane.

Jesus hadn't worked out. Perhaps Mary Jane would treat me better.

Those first few months in college my experiences with cannabis were sublime, ethereal. I wasn't in the pursuit of a high. That was never my thing. I was seeking experience, seeking truth, just like always. With cannabis I discovered a social ease, a wellness, and an ability to stand separate from my instant judgments of things. It was as if I'd donned an armor against frustration and drama every time I would dance with Mary Jane. And I didn't need any masks while we danced. My social nervousness would shed, my self-confidence would soar, and my heart began to reopen. She was a balm, deeply healing my long held pain.

She became the only woman I'd ever fall in love with.

A life I didn't even know was unbearable, became bearable again. I began to awaken. I began to want more authenticity in my life. I was in the closet still, though the door was ajar and I kept inviting boys to come in for secret rendezvous. Mary Jane's calming influence and the force of laid-back experimentation and open-mindedness prevalent on Oberlin's campus coalesced into a kind of cresting wave, carrying me back to myself, forcing me to grapple in the undertow of my own self-loathing. I was surfing with Mary Jane, playing with the universe, and opening up to the possibility of an openly gay life.

I found the courage to come out of the closet that semester.

I think that's a big part of the reason I was so willing to follow Mary Jane into battle on the front lines of the drug war when Georgie suggested it years later. She helped to coax me out of the closet and toward my authentic self. I knew her true healing spirit. I knew she was a hero, and a warrior, and a savior. I understood that she was misunderstood, and I could relate to that. If there was a god, then she had been sent here by *him*. This was the really good news, and

people needed to know about it. I had no idea that information about the benefits of cannabis was being deliberately suppressed, by pharmaceutical, government, and corporate interests. I wasn't ready to enlist just yet.

That didn't stop me from becoming a war profiteer though.

I started selling cannabis the following spring, and it paid for my college housing for three years straight.

\* \* \*

It was spring break and I'd been spending about \$50 a week on weed. I was on financial aid and still thought of weed as just a recreational drug, so I felt guilty spending that kind of cash. Maybe if I'd been taught about the medicinal aspects of the plant, the components that enhance well-being and reverse pain, I'd have felt differently. But I didn't know any of that. All I knew was if mom found out I was blowing \$200 a month on "drugs", as she'd call it, I'd get a never ending lecture on fiscal responsibility and substance abuse. It didn't matter that it helped to coax me out of my shell, or that it had no side-effects, or that it just felt right. I wasn't supposed to be doing it, so I had to find a way to fund my new treatment program.

"Can you get a deal on a QP?" I asked Jewel, a townie friend who worked at the Oberlin Brew house with me.

"Yeah, come to my place tonight and we can discuss it," Jewel said casually.

"Cool, thanks."

I could tell from her tone of voice that a QP would be no problem. If I sold only three of the four ounces I'd have more than enough for another QP and some rent, and an ounce of bud to myself. It was perfect. And no more \$200 a month expenditures to explain to mom.

"You're gay, right?" Jewel asked hesitantly, pulling me from my internal calculations.

*What do you care?* I thought to myself.

“Yeah,” I said softly. This was the first time I’d been asked point blank since coming out of the closet. It felt liberating to say ‘yeah’. I wished I’d said ‘fuck yeah’.

“Cool, well, my husband Jackson and I were looking to do a threesome with someone. He’s not gay, but he does like to be with other guys.”

My mind was reeling. What was she getting at?

“Oh, that’s cool,” I said.

“Would you like to meet him? And if the vibe is right, we can all get stoned and hook up?”

Wow, she was direct. I’d just come out of the closet, no reason I couldn’t browse around in the department store for a while.

I vetted my first weed connect and had my first threesome at the same time.

I was the guest star in our triangle so they both focused on me. I didn’t go near her vagina, and he didn’t go near my ass, but otherwise we were pretty thorough in our explorations of each other.

Profiting off the drug war was going to be way more fun than I thought.

I spent ten years in born-again religiosity and never met God. I’d spend twenty minutes with Mary Jane and come face to face with God, every single time. God was bigger than religion, and bigger than beliefs and points of view. God was truth incarnate, raw experience, revelatory awareness. Mary Jane brought me closer to that than the church ever could.

To know God, your mind had to be open.

Mary Jane can help with that, religion can’t.