

BAKED FRESH DAILY

2025 V Le Chenz

“Go!”

“Get in the car!”

“GET. IN. THE. FUCKING. CAR!” my mother shouted, her voice echoing like a siren on steroids sending chills racing down my spine. The words sliced through the thick summer air like a hot knife through butter as my little brother and I bolted down the driveway. Adrenaline, coursing through our veins as if we were training for an Olympic sprint. The sun blazed overhead, a relentless ball of fire casting shimmering heat waves that danced before our eyes, seemingly mocking our predicament. We felt the sun’s wrath radiating from the asphalt beneath our feet, each step a reminder that the universe was totally intent on roasting us alive. After burning our fingers opening the red-hot metal door handles, we dove into the backseat of our searing Toyota Corolla hatchback.

As we settled into our seats our thighs stung from the intense heat from the nearly melted vinyl. The seat felt like it had been baking in the sun since the dawn of time! We quickly rolled down the windows, desperate for a gust of fresh air. The sound of the hot rushing wind filled the car, drowning out the chaos of our morning as we struggled to buckle up, and to breathe.

My brother, a whirlwind of energy and excitement, began to babble excitedly about our possible destinations, utterly oblivious to the mounting frustration radiating from our mother’s very soul. I looked at her, noting the furrow in her brow and the way she kept stretching the fingers on her hands out wide, again, and again. She was preparing to slap the shit out of somebody, and I knew exactly who those somebody’s were! The atmosphere inside the car was charged with a mix of adrenaline and anxiety, like a high-stakes poker game where we all understood that time was definitely not on our side.

It was a scorching summer day in the small town of Glenville, a suburb of Greenwich CT. The heat wrapped around you like an annoying relative who overstays their welcome. The year was 1977, and I was just 10 years old.

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My brother was not alone; I was also bursting with energy that was likely fueled by all the sugar in our breakfast cereal. With school out for a couple more weeks, the anticipation of continued summer adventures bubbled inside us kids like a soda can that was shaken too much, just waiting to explode all over the place. It was the kind of day that begged for adventure, yet the oppressive heat kept us trapped indoors like contestants on a dreadful reality show nobody wanted to watch.

The temperature soared to unbearable heights, and my father, usually busy with work, found himself confined to the house with us. We all tried to stay cool, huddled together in the living room. Blankets hung from all doorways keeping the cooler air inside the one room. We surrounded ourselves with the comforting hum of air conditioners and the steady whir of fans, our only allies in this battle against the sun. Old TV shows flickered on the screen, but they offered little relief from the sticky discomfort that clung to us like a bad idea. We were miserable, longing for the freedom of the outdoors but unable to escape the sweltering heat.

It was the early days of cable TV, a novelty that brought a world of entertainment into our homes, yet it was notoriously unreliable, like a lazy employee who only shows up when they feel like it. Just as we settled in for an afternoon of laughter and adventure, disaster struck. At precisely 4 PM, right on cue, the screen flickered and went dark. The cable had gone out! In an instant, our collective joy turned to disbelief. Our faces fell, jaws dropped, and a chorus of "NO!" erupted from our lips in perfect unison. My dad, usually a calm presence, was the loudest of the bunch, his frustration echoing through the room like a thunderclap; seriously, you would think the world was ending. My brother and I were bouncing off of the walls, so this movie thing was their last hope to chill us out, or so we thought.

I couldn't help but imagine that the same thing was happening in every house across town. Were other families experiencing the same shock and disappointment? Did our simultaneous cries create a ripple effect that could be felt throughout the neighborhood? I wondered if the

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neighborhood's collective outburst could have registered on the Richter scale. Absurd as it seemed, at that moment, it felt entirely plausible. As we sat in stunned silence, the oppressive heat intensified, leaving us to ponder the sudden loss of our afternoon escape, like losing a winning lottery ticket just before the draw.

By the time my parents reached the car, my brother and I had already taken the initiative to cool it down for them, desperately hoping our efforts would lift their spirits and earn us some much-needed points. We immediately rolled down the windows, started the car, and cranked the AC. Once my parents hopped in, we pulled away heading down the street and onto the main road leading to Riversville Road. Suddenly, my father commanded us to roll up the windows as if it weren't a sweltering 110 degrees outside and as if the air conditioning in this inexpensive little Japanese car could actually provide any relief. The moment he issued the command, my brother and I exchanged bewildered glances and simultaneously asked, "Why?" My father, peering through his furrowed brows in the rearview mirror, insisted, "Now!" At that moment, I was sure I was about to piss myself.

Riversville Road stretched out before us, a long and winding road, hehe, that snaked into the backcountry, offering breathtaking views of the surrounding mansions and landscape. Who wouldn't want to gawk at rich people's houses while simultaneously sweating to death? We passed Baliwick and had been on the road for about five minutes, with the windows sealed tight, when my father decided to light a cigarette. My brother and I exchanged incredulous looks, our disbelief palpable; instinctively, we began to roll the windows back down. That's when I noticed my mother's eyes, or rather, the lack thereof, as they were nothing but narrow slits, glaring at us. She mouthed something, but the words were indistinguishable; all I could see was her teeth popping up and down in a frantic rhythm, as if trying to communicate a warning, like a cartoon character on fast forward.

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In a panic, as if our very lives depended on it, we rolled the windows back up, because at that moment, we thought they did. The atmosphere in the car felt stifling, and I couldn't shake the feeling that my parents were about to abandon us in the middle of the woods, like Hansel and well, Hansel, leaving us to fend for ourselves, which, in backcountry Greenwich, wouldn't be the worst thing to happen to us. The tension was thick enough to cut with a knife, and I could almost hear my heart pounding in my chest as I braced myself for whatever was coming next.

After a minute or so, I told my brother that the smoke didn't smell like cigarettes. He replied, "I know!". My eyes started burning as the car filled with smoke so thick we couldn't see outside. We begged to roll down the windows but were denied. So, we sat back, careful not to push things too far because if we did, we'd get the belt. I was pretty sure I was already going to get the belt for something else, and normally I would have had no problem pushing another button, but I held it in like a pro.

We were now ten minutes into the drive, and I was beginning to feel lightheaded. My brother, grinning from ear to ear, was propped up in the middle of the back seat, leaning into the front between the seats and asking questions about God and how he could become an only child. I followed up by asking where the best place to throw up was. All three of them looked at me. I had never seen real fear before, real fear in others that is. But they had it, in spades. They were lucky because I was just kidding. We all started laughing uncontrollably. My brother and I finally wound down while exchanging question after question, taking turns and behaving as if we had somehow matured a dozen years. We were a couple of Vinny Barbarinos, full of curiosity about who, what, where, when, and why.

Before we knew it, we had fallen asleep, and when we woke up, we found ourselves back at home. My brother and I stirred to discover a cloud of smoke surrounding the car, a surreal haze that mirrored our disorientation. As we stepped out, the familiar sight of our house came into view, and I heard my mother say, "Great idea, Michael." We all sat on the couch and

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turned on the cable, eager to escape into the world of entertainment, hoping it would provide the relief we so desperately needed, because, let's be honest, what else were we going to do?

That was my introduction to marijuana, an experience that would mark the beginning of my understanding of the complexities of adulthood and the secrets that sometimes linger just beneath the surface of family life. Who knew that a trip in a hot car could lead to an enlightening session worthy of a TED Talk?

From that day forward, my awareness of that magical weed skyrocketed, completely transforming me into something like a stealthy ninja. My senses heightened to an almost supernatural level; I began to obsess over every secretive, hidden spot where my dad might stash his precious green treasure. Seriously, every crevice of our home became a potential hiding place. I felt like a detective in a low-budget crime drama, on a mission to uncover the whereabouts of the Holy Grail of high.

I memorized his elaborate rituals, the way he would check his surroundings before retrieving his stash, like he was about to defuse a bomb instead of just rolling a joint. He only smoked joints. I always thought that that meant that he was a 'casual' user since he didn't have any bongs or pipes lying about.

Going forward it became my personal mission, a quest of sorts, to immerse myself in those pop-up smoky rooms as much as possible! My nose was on the job 24/7! I fancied myself to be an intrepid explorer, navigating the enigmatic landscape of my home. Each room held its own secrets and stories, like a bad sitcom waiting for a laugh track. The air was often thick with the scent of burnt herbs, black lights, and the soft glow of dim lamps illuminating laughter and camaraderie.

Every encounter with the smoke felt like a rite of passage, an initiation into a world that was both exhilarating and forbidden, like sneaking into a rated R movie while still in Jr. high. As I honed my skills in this clandestine

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adventure, I developed a keen eye for detail, noticing the smallest changes in my father's habits and his interactions with his beloved herb. I learned to appreciate the art of rolling, mastering the subtle adjustments needed for the perfect joint. It became an unspoken language shared among us, like the secret handshake of the stoner elite.

My passion for the plant grew, weaving itself into the fabric of my everyday life and transforming mundane moments into magical experiences filled with the promise of connection and exploration. I became a connoisseur of sorts, savoring the nuances of different strains and the unique highs they offered and despite my growing curiosity and fervent interest in marijuana, I never dared to speak about it to anyone. My fascination with this controversial plant was profound, yet I skillfully concealed it from those around me. I made it a point to never let on that my interest in marijuana troubled me in any way. This cloak of discretion not only shielded my secret but also granted me the freedom to move about my home without raising suspicion from my parents. Observing their behaviors and habits with keen fascination, I realized how common and normalized their views on these substances were, contrasting sharply with my own internal conflict.

Whenever the pop-ups break out, I would stroll through the various rooms of our house, projecting an air of nonchalance, as if I were simply there to engage in routine activities. I ensured that my demeanor was relaxed and carefree so they wouldn't think I was overly eager in my quest for a contact high. Each time I walked through those spaces, I felt a mix of excitement and anxiety; I was a silent observer in a world that was both familiar and foreign to me. My heart raced as I took in the details of their interactions, the subtle nuances revealing their perspectives on life and, unknowingly, on the very substance that fascinated me so deeply.

This careful balancing act of secrecy and observation became an intricate part of my daily routine. I learned to blend in seamlessly, adopting behaviors and interests that kept me under the radar. I became adept at deflecting questions about my opinions on weed and other substances,

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often diverting conversations to safer topics. Yet, internally, I grappled with a myriad of thoughts and emotions about marijuana and its implications. The more I observed, the more my curiosity matured into a profound sense of wonder, urging me to explore the subject further.

But let's be real: whenever that familiar, intoxicating cloud of cannabis smoke filled the air, I found myself inhaling deeply and with each breath, I became hyper-aware of the profound experience unfolding around me; it was as if I had suddenly become an art critic in a museum, except the art consisted of a group of stoners trying to remember whether they left the oven on.

I savored every moment of those encounters like a connoisseur indulging in a lavish five-star dining experience, relishing the rich complexity of the aroma wafting through the air and trying not to cough on some guy's secondhand smoke. The warm embrace of that euphoric haze wrapped around me, cradling me like a mother with a slight drinking problem, comforting yet slightly concerning.

No matter how long I lingered in those hazy environments, I felt utterly captivated. The laughter echoed around the room like a sitcom laugh track, and the spirited conversations floated through the air like smoke, thick enough to cut with a knife. As the smoke curled and danced in the dim light, I watched it mingle with the laughter and stories being shared, creating an energy that pulsed with life, like a rave that forgot it was supposed to be a gathering of responsible adults. In these moments, I discovered a sense of freedom, a liberation from the mundane constraints of everyday life. The haze transformed the ordinary into the extraordinary, allowing me to explore the depths of my thoughts and emotions in a way I had never experienced before, like suddenly realizing that the grocery store has a whole aisle dedicated to snacks. Each encounter, each shared smile, pulled me further into this enchanting realm, where boundaries faded and possibilities flourished, and just hoping I wouldn't forget my own name by the end of the night.

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I recall one particular night when my parents had people over, about 6 or 7. The house was thick with smoke and they were having a fun time, as usual. At some point, one of them pulled out a tape recorder, you know, the old-fashioned tabletop recorders. He popped in a homemade tape, rewound it, and waited. He rolled a couple more joints and started passing them around. I recall everything like it was yesterday! When their highs were at just the right level, he pushed play.

The recording was of the guy sitting on the toilet having a serious and long bout with diarrhea and all you hear is the diarrhea exploding into the toilet and him grunting. This went on for few minutes, and everyone was on the floor, including me.

Imagine it...

At the tender age of ten, almost eleven, I found myself unwittingly immersed in the 'high' life on a daily basis, surrounded by an environment that was as surreal as it was intoxicating. My weekends were particularly vivid, resembling a scene straight out of a stoner movie. My parents indulged in their habits two or three times a day, blissfully unaware of the impact their lifestyle had on me. The days flowed lazily, filled with laughter and the haze of smoke that curled around us like a warm blanket.

Even at that young age, I couldn't ignore the phenomenon known as contact highs. I often wondered what my parents expected in such a smoke-filled atmosphere, where the air was thick with the scent of their indulgence, a heady mix of sweet and pungent notes that lingered long after the last puff had been taken. I watched them drift through the days, their laughter echoing in the corners of our living room, and I marveled at how they could be so carefree, so oblivious to the world outside our smoky sanctuary.

As time passed and I became more attuned to their habits, I started to notice the roaches. Tiny remnants my father would leave behind. My father would often hide them beneath couch cushions or tucked away in the pockets of jackets, tiny treasures. I found myself collecting these

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mementos, fascinated by their significance, as if each one held a story of its own. In my childlike innocence, I felt a sense of belonging in this peculiar world, even as I navigated the complexity of my feelings about it.

The vibrant chaos of our weekends became experiences, each thread woven with laughter, music, and the occasional argument that would disrupt the calm. I would sit cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by the colorful remnants of their lives, watching them lose themselves in conversation, their words slurring together like a beautiful melody. In those moments, I was both an observer and a participant, caught in the whirlwind, feeling the waves of euphoria washing over me.

I couldn't resist the temptation to snatch those little gems and share them with my friends, who, like me, were equally curious and eager to explore the world of altered states. We were just a bunch of kids, but the allure of this secret realm made us feel adventurous, almost like mini junkies on a quest for our next thrill. As the months passed, emboldened by newfound confidence and a sense of rebelliousness, I finally found the courage to dive deeper into my father's stash box. It was a seemingly innocent cigar box, deceptively hidden beneath the living room couch, yet it held treasures that were far from innocent.

I vividly recall the moments when we would watch him pull it out, rolling a joint with the precision of an artist crafting a masterpiece. Now back then, all weed had seeds, and you had to filter them out. I could hear the sound of him breaking up the weed and the seeds hitting the bottom of the balsam box. Then the sound of them rolling down the box as he held the box on an angle as he would use a playing card to scrape and maneuver the chili around to separate everything. Each movement was deliberate, and the ritual felt sacred.

After he finished, he would put it away as if it were a state secret, slipping it back beneath the couch as if concealing the mysteries of the universe. We knew exactly where it was hidden, and that knowledge became a source of both excitement and mischief for me. It fueled my inner rebel, whispering

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promises of adventure and danger, urging me to explore the boundaries of childhood innocence and the adult world that seemed just out of reach. Each day, the anticipation grew, and I found myself caught in a cycle of curiosity and defiance, eager to uncover the secrets that lay within that unassuming box.

I certainly wasn't complaining about the situation, though. My dad always had a steady supply of weed, and I was pretty sure he had introduced my mom to it. It felt like we were all high at some point during the day, creating a surreal environment filled with laughter that floated in the air and conversations as relaxed as a sloth lounging on a Sunday afternoon. This was the norm for us, whether during monotonous school days, wild weekends, festive holidays, or carefree vacations. Yet, amidst what seemed like a perfect stoner paradise, my parents often wondered why I struggled so much in school. The irony was thick enough to cut with a knife: the very atmosphere they cultivated at home, infused with smoke and laughter, significantly contributed to my academic failures. I was living in a paradox, a cozy home life undermined by the very habits that shaped it, like a sitcom gone horribly wrong, where the punchlines were lost in a haze of confusion and smoke.

I suppose you could say that I have an addictive personality, one that tends to swing between extremes. I dive headfirst into everything I do, embracing it with fervor or completely shunning it. For me, it's a black-and-white existence; there's rarely a middle ground. When I find something, I genuinely like, I don't just enjoy it, I absolutely love it with an intensity that can border on obsession. This fervor continues unabated until I reach a point of saturation, where I can no longer bear to look at it or hear it again. My passions were as all-consuming as they are now, a pattern that has woven itself into the fabric of my life.

Music became one of my primary outlets, a passion that would engulf me entirely. When I discovered a song that resonated with me, it was not uncommon for me to play it on repeat until I wore out the record or, in some

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cases, until I needed a new needle for my turntable. One of those unforgettable songs was “Sandy” from the iconic musical Grease.

In 1979, my grandfather took me to the theater to see it, and it turned out to be one of the most amazing experiences I had ever encountered. The colors, the music, and the vibrant characters all swept me off my feet. I was enthralled, especially when the characters sang about topics that were so bold for that time. I distinctly remember how shocked yet amused I was when they casually mentioned female body parts in the catchy song “Greased Lightning.” I marveled at how they managed to slip that past the censors. It was exhilarating to hear such audacious language in a mainstream film, especially one that was so beloved by audiences of all ages.

After the movie, I couldn’t wait to get my hands on the album. I rushed home and listened to it on repeat, absorbing every note and lyric until I knew all the songs by heart. I was in the seventh grade, navigating the tumultuous waters of my first year in junior high, and I had no shortage of crushes to sing and cry about. Every evening was an emotional rollercoaster, filled with the highs of infatuation and the lows of heartbreak. The songs became the soundtrack to my young life, perfectly encapsulating the whirlwind of feelings I experienced as I grappled with the trials and tribulations of adolescence. I sang along passionately, pouring my heart into the melodies, using music as an outlet for the overwhelming emotions of being a teenager. Each note connected with my soul, allowing me to escape into a world where everything felt both vibrant and painfully real. I would even change “Sandy” to the name of my latest crush, belting out the lyrics as if they were a personal love letter. Did you do that too?

I was never a shower singer though. I left that to my brother. He did a great National Anthem! The deep emotional connection to music was all exacerbated by the fact that I was often stoned from the secondhand smoke that permeated every corner of the house. I often found myself in a haze, baked by the fumes of my hippie parents’ indulgences. There I was,

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belting out “Sa-ndy, ba-by, I’m in misery!” with a fervor that could only be described as both tragic and comical. I can only imagine how sad a sight it must have been to witness. Caught in the throes of a smoky stupor and passionately singing a love song that probably flew over my head at the time. But honestly, that was perhaps the best version of myself that I could muster during those bewildering years, where confusion ruled our days.

If I were to take a stroll down memory lane and list my crushes in chronological order, it would go something like this: Lana in 4th grade, Quinnie in 5th grade, Tracy in 6th grade, and finally, Tanya, who captivated me from 7th grade all the way through 12th grade and even somehow, unexpectedly, into college. Those were the big ones and there were many fleeting crushes in between. The common thread among these girls, barring one exception, was that they were all blondes, more or less embodying a look and vibe that was as far removed from my New York upbringing as one could imagine. The one girl who didn’t fit this mold had brown hair, but even she seemed to radiate a charm that was distinct from what I was accustomed to at home, a refreshing change that challenged my perceptions and broadened my horizons.

As for the music that shaped my adolescent years, I gravitated toward the softer side of rock, the whiny, emotional ballads that resonated with my teenage angst and emotional turmoil. REO Speedwagon and Elvis among others dominated my playlists, their top songs echoing through my mind like anthems of unrequited love, each note striking a chord deep within me. I immersed myself in the sounds of the Beatles and a myriad of other artists and always tuning in to the Top 40. It was through these melodies and lyrics that I found a connection to my feelings, even if I didn’t fully understand them yet. Music became a refuge, a place where I could articulate the complex emotions swirling within me, creating a soundscape that mirrored my innermost thoughts and experiences.

Marijuana is one of those unique substances that should never be classified as a drug nor restricted in its natural form. I mean, come on, it

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grows freely in nature for a reason, it's like Mother Nature's gift to us, whispering, "Here, take a load off and chill." Life can be a real drag sometimes, right? Sure, we have our moments of joy, those fleeting bursts of happiness that last about as long as a good pizza slice before reality smacks you right in the face. And let's not forget the ultimate party crasher: death.

We can kick the bucket in a million different ways, some horrible, some natural, and others downright ridiculous. I've spent an inordinate amount of time contemplating my own mortality, stressing over how I will leave this world. Will I be mauled by a bear? Chopped into pieces by a serial killer? Or will I just drop dead on the toilet like Elvis? Going out like Elvis is my worst nightmare. I think about it ALL THE TIME! So much so that my wife and I have a plan should it ever happen. It starts with pulling my pants up and ends with flushing the toilet! I mean, talk about going out in style; nothing says "I lived my best life" quite like being found lifeless on the john.

My father was arrested when I was about five, and I still vividly recall that day when a couple of cops showed up at our tiny, cramped house, carting him off like he was some sort of prize catch. They even grabbed the two hundred bucks we had stashed on top of the fridge. Talk about a real operation! A few years later, we ended up moving right across the street from one of those cops. Back then, I didn't fully grasp what was happening; I was just a kid trying to figure out why my dad was being taken away. My mother and the cop's wife, Ellen, became tight. Ellen was a super talented seamstress who could whip up anything you could imagine. She was pretty amazing, really, like a superhero with a sewing machine.

Her husband, Ronnie, the cop, was truly a piece of work. This guy was so incredibly self-absorbed that he'd frequently refer to himself in the third person. Ever heard of illeism? Yeah, that was his jam, and he wore it like a badge of honor. Meanwhile, Ellen, his long-suffering partner, was busting her butt sewing and trying to keep their household together while everything around her was literally falling apart. The roof had leaks, the

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walls were peeling, the floors creaked ominously underfoot, and the back of their house was about to fall off down the embankment and into the Byram river. And what does Ron do in the midst of all this chaos? He goes out and buys himself a brand-new motorcycle, a shiny toy that screamed mid-life crisis. Classic, right?

To boost her own confidence and perhaps reclaim some sense of herself, Ellen started mirroring my mother. Suddenly, she was wearing makeup, maybe a bit too much, like my mom, bright lipstick, and sporting this huge, voluminous hairdo that seemed to defy gravity. After shedding a lot of weight, she was all about living her best life, sunbathing on our deck and puffing away on cigarettes. I'd always, if I were home, peek out the kitchen window down at her, watching her lounge there like a sun goddess, soaking up the sun's rays. She was a natural blonde, too, because I could see a few strands peeking out from under her bikini, glinting in the sunlight. I was that close.

But as I stood there, leaning over the kitchen sink, looking down at Ellen through the screen window, being so careful not to make a sound, I was hit with a groundswell of horniness that felt criminal. At that moment, I knew I had to get out of there, so I didn't do something stupid! I hightailed it to my room, where I could indulge in what I liked to call "self-reflection." In my little sanctuary, I could dive deep into the absurdities of life, the complexities of growing up, and the chaotic mess the world had become, kind of like a tornado made of laundry and bad decisions swirling around me.

Had I stuck around, staring out of that damn window, I definitely would have ended up in an "American Pie" moment, had that been a thing back then! I can absolutely picture myself grabbing a pie and positioning it next to the sink, staring out the window at Ellen basking in the sun, while simultaneously trying to avoid seeing any part of my mother who was lying right next to her.

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But let's be real, there was no way I could have pulled that off without a catastrophic failure taking place. I could see it now: I'd lose my balance, end up crashing through the window screen like a scene straight out of a disaster movie, and land right on them! my crotch covered in apple pie filling. There would be NO coming back from that humiliation. I would have had to run away for sure. It was a stark reminder of the awkwardness of adolescence and the wild lengths I would fantasize about just to escape it.

Fast forward a few years, and she finally divorced Ronald. I ran into him once when I popped back into town. I decided to hit up a bar I used to frequent. I plopped down at the bar, just me and this couple at the end, and honestly, I didn't even register them; eye contact is for people who want to socialize, and I was just there for a beer. So, I am nursing my Rolling Rock, stoned out of my mind, as usual, when I overhear the guy say, "That doesn't sound like Ronnie R." Seriously? It's been like 15 years, but of course, there he was, still talking about himself in the third person like it was his job.

I hesitated to turn and look because let's be real, who wants to catch up with a guy like that? But curiosity got the best of me, and yep, it was him, his face a little rounder but otherwise unchanged. I said, "You're Ron R? I'm V." He introduced me to his much younger wife, who seemed nice enough, but way too hot for him. We exchanged pleasantries while reminiscing about the past like a couple of old geezers. After a while, I figured it was time to bail, feeling a weird mix of nostalgia and relief as I stepped back into the real world.

In that moment, I couldn't help but reflect on how life had a funny way of circling back around. Here I was, years later, sitting across from a man who had been a fairly important part of my childhood, yet somehow felt like a relic from another time. The laughter and stories we exchanged reminded me of just how intertwined our lives had been during those chaotic days. I recalled the way Ron would strut around with an air of authority, as if his uniform somehow elevated him above everyone else, and how Ellen would roll her eyes at him, a silent partner in his little kingdom of delusion, and

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how no one knew that I would indulge in fantasies about the cop's wife sunbathing on my deck every chance I got, a secret that felt both thrilling and shameful.

But life moves on, doesn't it? The bar was dimly lit and filling up with the familiar sounds of clinking glasses and muffled conversations. I took a deep breath, letting the comforting aroma of beer and wine wash over me, grounding me in the present moment. As I glanced around, I couldn't help but think about how far I had come, how those childhood memories were now just echoes of a distant past that shaped who I was today. With a bittersweet smile, I raised my glass, toasting to the unpredictability of life and the characters that make it all the more interesting. Each sip of beer tasted like a reminder of the past, a celebration of the strange journey I had taken, and the realization that every encounter, no matter how odd, contributed to my existence.

Looking back on those so-called carefree days of my youth, I'm hit with a wave of nostalgia mixed with a side of regret. Seriously, why didn't I appreciate life more while I was busy doing absolutely nothing? Those days were packed with laughter and what I can only describe as "adventures" that mostly involved dodging responsibilities. They are now just distant memories. I often find myself wishing I had cherished them more, like that last slice of pizza you know you should've saved for breakfast but inhaled instead.

Among the few things I genuinely appreciated during my childhood were those long drives we took even if they were often wrapped in a cloud of smoke. Those drives transformed our car into a sanctuary, like a rolling therapy session, except instead of a therapist, I had my father, who was more interested in his next smoke than my emotional well-being. These weren't just casual Sunday drives; no, these were epic quests, happening multiple times a week, each trip an adventure unto itself. Almost every time I returned home from one of these exhilarating escapades, I was belting out "Babe" by Styx, my voice echoing through the empty halls of our house

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while I daydreamed about my latest crush, lost in a world of youthful infatuation and genuine cluelessness.

However, let's clear the air; my parents didn't always take us on these drives just to get us high, as if it were part of some elaborate "Keep the Kids Calm" conspiracy. No, we were most often headed somewhere with purpose: visiting friends, running errands, or just exploring those winding roads that stretched on forever. But among the various memories from these drives, one particularly vivid and quite unpleasant moment stands out like a bad rash. It was a recurring theme that would strike fear into my heart: the moment my father would, without warning, unleash the dreaded oyster-sized "loogie" out of his window. This was a family tradition that I never signed up for!

He was a heavy smoker, putting away several packs a day, and his pot consumption meant he was always hacking up something green and disgusting. Picture this: I'm leaning my head out of the back window like a dog, enjoying the day, when suddenly, bam! A massive gob of phlegm covers my face, along with its unfortunate accompanying spray. The shock would send me into a gagging fit, my stomach churning, and me trying to wrap my head around the grotesque horror that just went down, again! All I got in return was a casual "sorry" from my father, who probably thought he'd just flicked an ash or something. Even now, as I relive that moment, I can feel nausea creeping back. You should realize by now that I am not the brightest bulb in the bulb drawer because not once did I ever consider changing seats with my brother.

It's a bizarre recollection, encapsulating the chaotic and unpredictable nature of those seemingly carefree days, where joy and disgust were two sides of the same coin. The absurdity of the situation, while revolting, also serves as a reminder of the vivid experiences that defined my youth. Now that I think about it, maybe he did it on purpose, like a twisted test of my resilience or some anarchic humor he thought would spice up our mundane journeys. Regardless of the intention, that moment remains a testament to

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the unpredictability of life, a bizarre blend of joy and grotesque that colored my childhood memories. Thanks for the trauma, Dad.

In fact, as a child, I was navigating a world that was far too complex for my young mind to comprehend fully. I was caught in a whirlwind of confusion and curiosity, experimenting with substances that I did not fully understand. My early experiences with pot blurred the lines between childhood innocence and reckless abandon, leading me down a path filled with poor decisions and a lack of foresight.

In hindsight, I can see that my youthful exploration was marred by naivety. The allure of marijuana, with its earthy scent and the comforting haze it provided, wrapped around me like a warm blanket, offering an escape from the pressures of growing up. Yet, this escape came at a cost that I was far too young to grasp. I was merely a child, yearning to fit in and discover who I was in a world that was often unkind and cruel. The momentary high would bring laughter and a sense of belonging, but it also clouded my judgment, leading me to make choices that would haunt me as I grew older.

Back in those days, during the frigid winter months when the air was so crisp it felt like you were inhaling tiny ice shards, the hottest weekend destination wasn't a fancy resort or a tropical paradise. Nope, it was the local skating rink. Our beloved Dorothy Hamill Skating Rink was the crown jewel of our community, named after the figure skater who made us believe that anyone could glide across ice without looking like a newborn elephant trying to get to its feet. She won a gold medal in 1976, and I'm pretty sure the entire town was convinced that her success was our success, because it WAS!

As the weekend rolled around, you could feel the excitement building like a pressure cooker about to blow. Families would gather, each person practically vibrating with anticipation to strap on their skates and attempt to channel their inner Olympic champion. The rink would buzz with energy, filled with the laughter of kids and the kind of cheerful banter that makes you want to roll your eyes and mutter about how annoying everyone is, but

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deep down you know you love it. The sound of blades slicing through ice mixed with the occasional shriek of someone trying a spin and ending up on their backside was like music to our ears.

I can vividly recall the way the cold air would bite at our cheeks, turning them a rosy red while we bundled up, ready to hit the ice. The rink was a magical place, a sanctuary where we could escape the mundane realities of life and just be kids. We would spend hours gliding, laughing, and occasionally falling hard, with each fall only serving to amplify the joy of the experience.

As I skated, I could feel the thrill of freedom, the wind whipping through my hair as I attempted to master the art of skating. I would watch the more skilled skaters with awe, their movements so graceful and effortless. I dreamed of being like them, gliding across the ice with the same confidence and poise. But looking back, it was not just about skating; it was the camaraderie, the friendship, and the shared moments that truly defined those winter weekends. We were all in it together, laughing at each other's missteps and cheering each other on, forging bonds that would last long after the ice melted.

Even amidst the challenges I faced in my personal life, those weekends at the skating rink were a beacon of joy. They served as a reminder of the innocence of childhood, a time when the biggest worry was whether I would manage to stay awake long enough to impress my friends. It was a simpler time, one that I now cherish deeply, as I reflect on the complexities that would soon follow, including my struggles and the journey of self-discovery that awaited me.

People of all ages would come together in joyful unity, drawn by their love for skating and the exhilarating thrill of pretending they weren't freezing their butts off in the brisk winter air. Only a few years earlier, they enclosed the rink. Yep, we started going there when it was an open rink, with only a roof and it was really cold, but enclosing it changed everything.

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The atmosphere was alive with laughter and chatter as parents gingerly guided their toddlers across the glistening ice, each little wobble met with encouraging words and hearty laughter. Meanwhile, teenagers showcased their “cool” tricks, attempting impressive spins and jumps, which, more often than not, ended in spectacular falls that elicited roars of laughter from onlookers. Friends would huddle together in cozy clusters, sharing steaming cups of hot cocoa or, in my personal favorite, the infamous “chicken soup broth,” a concoction that somehow blended the warmth of soup with the thrill of skating. This vibrant scene was not merely a pastime; it was a cherished ritual that glued our community together, akin to a whimsical family reunion but with significantly less awkward conversation and far more laughter and falling down. The Dorothy Hamill Skating Rink transcended the definition of a mere rink; it became a beloved sanctuary where we crafted memories, forged lifelong friendships, and celebrated the wonders of winter in the most chaotic and delightful way imaginable.

This reminds me of a skating riddle from the era that my father told me:

“Name something green that slides across the ice.”

“Peggy Flem.”

Good one, dad!

During my time in school, there were multiple occasions when I fell prey to the misguided temptation of purchasing what I believed to be marijuana, lured by the appeal of fitting in with the older kids. Instead, I ended up with nothing more than pencil shavings and a pinch of oregano, all thanks to the local punk in a Rush T-shirt who often lingered outside the rink. At that time, I was known for being an exceptionally skilled skater, gliding effortlessly across the ice with a grace that left others in awe. However, when it came to playing hockey, my skills left much to be desired. That ended up being my brother’s thing. The singing, the hockey, oh, and the girls were his too. I participated in the sport for several years during my childhood, and

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thoroughly enjoyed the camaraderie of my teammates, even if my performance on the ice was less than stellar.

One summer, when I was just ten years old, my parents decided to send my brother and me to a hockey camp in Quebec, in a whole other country! I thought for sure that we were never going back home! They “hoped” to sharpen our skills and learn from experienced coaches. However, instead of focusing on drills and gameplay, I often found myself nestling in the warmth of the lodge, happily sipping hot chocolate, buzzing around the rink in a desperate attempt to impress the girls who attended the camp, or in the nurse’s office. I was always getting injured.

My talents lay in my ability to execute a perfect snowplow and ride the broom maneuvers, yet when it came to actual gameplay, I struggled immensely. I lacked the crucial peripheral vision that is essential for any good hockey player, and my instincts often betrayed me. As a result, I would get flattened the moment I ventured too close to the puck and made me feel more like a comedic character than a serious athlete. It was a harsh reminder that while skating might be my forte, hockey was a far more complex game requiring skills I was yet to master.

I could vividly picture myself as Adam Sandler in “Happy Gilmore,” flailing about and feeling utterly out of my depth. The image was comical yet painfully accurate. One year, I was feeling overwhelmed and frustrated as I prepared my gear for the upcoming hockey season. The equipment felt heavy and cumbersome, and my facemask was missing screws. In a moment of exasperation, I threw a mini tantrum, lamenting that my gear was subpar and not living up to my expectations. It was as if the universe was conspiring against me, and in a fit of despair, I seized the opportunity to quit the sport altogether. And quit I did. This decision marked a pivotal turning point in my life, as I came to realize that perhaps my true talents lay elsewhere, far from the ice rink and the competitive world of hockey that had become so disheartening.

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Despite my departure from the sport, I still made it a point to go to the rink every Friday or Saturday night, drawn there by a swirling mix of emotions that I couldn't quite articulate. Besides, going to the rink got me out of the house and provided the privacy all of us young stoners needed. There were plenty of places to hide out around the outside of the rink. There were woods, a big parking lot, a couple of baseball fields; it was wide open, folks.

Each time I stepped through those familiar doors, I was filled with the flickering hope of catching the attention of a cute girl named Annie. She was the kind of girl who could make my heart race with just a glance, her bright smile and infectious laughter illuminating the dreary atmosphere of the rink. However, despite my longing and the daydreams that often consumed my thoughts, she never seemed to acknowledge my existence. But then again, I never really put myself out there to ask for her attention either. The truth was, I felt completely paralyzed by my own insecurities. My lack of confidence, the bad acne that dotted my face, my huge fro, and my rather awkward personality held me captive, preventing me from making any meaningful connection.

Then, one fateful night, everything changed in a way I could never have anticipated. To my utter astonishment, Annie started walking towards me. My eyes widened in disbelief as she closed the distance between us, her graceful movements drawing my attention. Could it really be that she was coming over to talk to me? My heart raced, pounding in my chest like a drum, and my mind spun with confusion and excitement. She was smiling, her radiant face illuminated by the rink's fluorescent lights, and she was looking directly at me. But even then, a part of me struggled to fully believe it. I glanced behind me, expecting to see someone else she might actually be interested in, a dashing hockey player, perhaps? But there was no one there. My jaw dropped, quite literally, as I stood frozen in place, catching flies with my wide-open gaping mouth. When she finally stopped right in front of me and said hello, I nearly passed out on the spot. Holy cow! I honestly can't recall if I ever mustered the courage to say hello back to her,

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but at that moment, it felt surreal, like a dream I never wanted to wake up from.

What happened next has been permanently saved into my bad memory folder. This is a place where my regrets and awkward moments, among other things reside. They are forever replaying in my mind, and there are a lot of them! This is one of only two experiences that I feel had the most impact in my life, ones that steered me to the person I am today. "Do you have a girlfriend?" Annie asked, her voice sweet and curious, laced with an innocence that made it hard to resist. Everyone around us, friends and acquaintances alike, knew I didn't have a girlfriend, and yet, it was unexpectedly kind of her to ask. I felt a mix of hope and anxiety swirling within me, battling for dominance. I half choked as I replied, "No." Then, she said something that caught me completely off guard, something that shifted the entire atmosphere between us. "Great! Do you see that girl right there? Do you like her?" My heart sank like a stone tossed into a deep, dark lake, and with my confidence rapidly deflating, I quickly and simply replied, "No" my voice barely above a whisper.

Even back then, I had a specific type that I was drawn to, and the girl in question was not it. I knew who she was; she seemed nice enough, with a friendly smile. However, I just wasn't attracted to redheads at that time in my life. It wasn't until much later that I learned to appreciate their beauty. As Annie turned and walked away, I felt a sinking sense of dread wash over me, as if the ground beneath me had suddenly vanished. I couldn't bear to watch as she relayed my response to her friend, the disappointment etched on her face amplifying my own feelings of regret. Even now, many years later, I still feel a twinge of guilt for the way I handled that moment, as if I had let a chance like that slip right through my fingers. I mean I was NOBODY! Who was I to turn down anyone? This angers me to this very day.

At that time, I had never experienced such a situation before, but even from a distance, I could empathize with her disappointment. It was a feeling I had come to know all too well, and I often ponder how different things

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might have been if I had chosen to respond differently. I didn't have to outright say that I liked the girl; I could have said something like, "Well, I don't know her, but I'd like to meet her," a simple statement that could have opened up a world of possibilities. Why was that so difficult for me? It baffles me to this day. I mean, I was a kid, I wasn't looking to get married, so what was the big deal? Agreeing to meet her, and maybe even be her boyfriend could have positively influenced my life, how I felt about myself, and indeed, even how I feel about people in general. This was such a great opportunity to gain some real-life experience and not be a doofus my whole life. Damn it!

This experience, so seemingly trivial at the time, set a precedent that would haunt me throughout my life, shaping my interactions and decisions in ways I couldn't have anticipated, like a shadow lurking in the corners of my mind, reminding me of what could have been.

Case in point, my first girlfriend in college, my first girlfriend ever, was a full-blown classic ginger. Isn't that funny? She embodied a unique beauty that captivated everyone around her, with her red hair, and blue eyes super light, almost gray. A delightful sprinkling of freckles that danced playfully across her nose. We met during a lively dorm party at a college in Waterbury, Connecticut, back in 1986, a time when everything felt new and exciting, filled with the promise of youth and exploration. Her name was Meg, and she was not just a pretty face; she was also incredibly intelligent, possessing a sharp mind that often left me in awe.

Meg often took it upon herself to tutor me in algebra and my business classes, patiently helping me navigate the murky waters of first-year academia. I distinctly remember long evenings spent in my cramped dorm room, surrounded by textbooks and scattered notes as she guided me through complex equations and theoretical concepts. Thanks to her unwavering support, I managed to keep my head above water during the tumultuous first semester. We had a blast together, laughing and bonding over late-night study sessions that often turned into spontaneous

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adventures, whether it was a midnight run for snacks or an impromptu karaoke session in the common area.

As the weeks turned into months, my weed addiction became a staple of our time together. Meg and I spent most of our days in my dorm, immersed in our homework and indulging in our shared habit of getting baked daily. She was super fun when stoned, her laughter ringing like music in the air, and she never pushed the limits too far. She maintained a balanced approach to her studies and social life, effortlessly managing to get straight A's while living what many would consider the dream college experience. Meanwhile, I found myself increasingly struggling to follow any semblance of a routine, my ambitions clouded by my indulgences.

As the academic year rolled on, I began to notice that the vibrant spark that had initially ignited our connection was starting to fade. The laughter that once flowed so freely began to quiet, and I sensed the distance growing between us like an invisible chasm. I was okay with it, though. Deep down, I already knew I was leaving school at the end of the year to head out west, chasing dreams that felt tantalizingly close yet frustratingly out of reach. The thought of new beginnings beckoned me, and as I prepared to step into a new chapter of my life, I couldn't help but reflect on the beautiful yet fleeting moments I had shared with Meg, moments that would forever be etched in my memory.

If there is one fundamental truth that I have come to grasp about myself, it's that I am best experienced in small doses. The initial allure that draws people in, like a moth to a flame, soon dissipates, much like a mirage that fades away beneath the relentless glare of the desert sun. It takes considerable time and effort to truly get to know the real me, and by the time you peel back those intricate layers, I tend to vanish from the scene, leaving only a faint echo of my presence. This is a pattern I have recognized and, in many ways, accepted over the years, albeit with a hint of resignation. I often find myself warning people about this aspect of my personality, believing it makes things easier for everyone involved in the

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long run. "You might like me now..." I would joke lightly, hoping to soften the inevitable blow of my eventual disappearance from their lives.

Just recently, a guy I had worked with years earlier, someone with whom I had shared a friendly rapport, re-entered my life when our children coincidentally joined the same school. Our interactions were pleasant enough; there were no significant issues to speak of, save for our contrasting political views, which alone were enough to place him on the lower half of my "give a shit about" list. A few years later, he informed me that he was moving over an hour away. My immediate reaction was a simple, stark comment: "well, that is too far." I had no plans to drive all the way out to his place for a get-together. I knew that we could have maintained our friendship if he lived within a reasonable distance of less than an hour. I am telling you; I am not okay in this reality.

Now, reflecting on my journey as a college freshman, I was certainly no prize. Just a few months prior, I was still navigating the waters of high school as a senior, and the transition to college life was anything but graceful. I found myself grappling with the lingering awkwardness of my teenage years, adorned with an array of zits that seemed to multiply at the most inconvenient times, sporting wild hair that appeared to have a mind of its own, and possessing a personality that could best be described as that of a raccoon, curious yet chaotic, often stumbling through life without a clear direction or purpose. I was what some might call a "new soul," trying to navigate through this unfamiliar world, trying to find my footing in a landscape that felt both exciting and daunting. I had adopted this persona, if you could even call it that, as a coping mechanism, a way to escape the consequences of the poor decisions that had frequently come my way. It was a survival strategy, one that allowed me to mask my insecurities and uncertainties as I ventured into new chapters of my life.

One of my poorest decisions, without a doubt, was the choice not to use condoms or any form of birth control during my relationship with Meg. At the time, she always claimed that she practiced the rhythm method, a term

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I had only heard of in passing but accepted without question, because let's be honest, I just wanted to get laid. In retrospect, this was not a brilliant move on my part, right? This was the mid-80s, an era when the AIDS epidemic had everyone running scared, yet somehow, Meg and I felt invincible in our youthful naivety. We were blissfully unaware of the risks we were taking, caught up in the whirlwind of young love and the thrill of our newly discovered intimacy. Well, I don't know about love... As the year drew to a close, we began to see less and less of each other. I had already mentally checked out, preoccupied with visions of my future life in California, while Meg slowly became more of a distant memory, fading into the background of my mind.

The moment classes wrapped up, I was gone! Leaving behind a chapter of my life that felt both exhilarating and frightening at the same time. I was eager to embrace the unknown, to dive headfirst into a new adventure, and to escape the remnants of my past. I made sure to see her before I left, mostly just to make sure she hadn't gained weight around the belly area! Her six-pack was still there, so, buh-bye.

I was quite young at the time, a mere child, so the intricate details of my parents' friendship with two brothers named Mike and Tom B completely flew right over my head. Honestly, I was so clueless during those formative years that I might as well have been a potato, an unassuming spud that was blissfully unaware of the vibrant life swirling around me. In those early years, we saw the brothers fairly often, and our interactions created a bizarre atmosphere filled with laughter and a sense of adventure, kind of like a sitcom, but without the laugh track and with much more dirt and chaos. We experienced enough contact highs in this new and unfamiliar environment to make Cheech and Chong proud. The brothers lived deep in the woods, in a place so remote that even Google Maps would give up and suggest I just turn around and go home. I had no real concept of towns or states back then; all I knew was that they weren't the typical wilderness

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dwellers you'd picture, no bear suits or wild animal taming, just a couple of guys who clearly had a passion for dirt bikes and the thrill of the outdoors.

One vivid memory stands out from our visits to their home, one that I can still conjure up in my mind as if it were yesterday. I recall one sunny afternoon when we decided to venture over there, and the brothers thought it would be an absolutely fantastic idea to give us rides on the back of their dirt bikes. We sped along winding trails as if we were the stars of some ridiculous action movie. Let me tell you, the thrill of the ride was like a shot of espresso for my young soul. It was a world where the boundaries of childhood imagination expanded beyond the mundane, and I was blissfully unaware of the complexities of adult life, like taxes, job interviews, and the eternal struggle to find a decent cup of coffee. I don't remember seeing many neighbors, if any, but perhaps they were just hiding from the chaos we were creating, wary of the wild laughter and reckless abandon that had taken over the woods.

Another memory from that same day took place when we all watched Mike, confident and daring, showcase his motorcycle skills with a level of bravado that made my heart race. It was all fun and games until he attempted a trick and ended up flipping the bike over on a hillside. For a moment, my heart stopped, racing with anxiety, but thankfully, he emerged unscathed. The laughter from us kids erupted like a chorus of joy, filling the air with an infectious energy that made everything seem possible, except for Mike's chances of winning any motorcycle safety awards. It was a moment of pure exhilaration, a snapshot of childhood freedom that I would cherish for years to come, or at least until I discovered the vast and distracting world of the internet.

As the sun began to set, painting the sky in hues of orange and pink, I found it odd to leave for home in a different vehicle than the one that had brought us there. But I was far too tired and spent from all the excitement to dwell on it. My brother and I simply climbed into the back of the van, our bodies

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heavy with fatigue, and promptly fell to sleep, the day's adventures still dancing in our dreams.

The following morning, I awoke to an unexpected sight: a full-sized custom van parked in our driveway, a curious addition to our otherwise ordinary home. It was one of those vans adorned with vibrant artwork on the side, the kind that seemed to tell stories of far-off places and adventures waiting to be had. Inside, the shag carpet felt delightfully plush beneath my fingers, like a tiny piece of heaven. I instantly fell in love with that van, dreaming of owning something similar when I grew up, right before reality hit me like a ton of bricks and I realized I'd probably end up with a modest Corolla instead. I don't recall how long we had it in our possession; it felt like a fleeting moment, a brief glimpse into a world of possibility. One day it was there, a beacon of wonder and excitement, and the next it simply vanished without a trace, like my dignity after a bad haircut.

Years later, during a casual conversation with my father, I learned a shocking detail about that van. The bench seats inside were filled with weed, something I had been blissfully unaware of as a child, lost in my innocent world of play. The revelation struck me like a bolt of lightning, illuminating the memories of that summer day in a new and unexpected light. I had no idea at the time, and since we didn't keep the van for long, I never had the chance to do any snooping or uncover its hidden secrets. But oh, how I would have loved to stumble upon pounds of weed hidden away, a treasure trove of secrets waiting to be discovered! What stories that van could have told if only I had known its hidden depths. Instead, I just thought it was a magic carpet ride; it turns out it was more of a magic "don't ask, don't tell" situation, a whimsical chapter in my childhood that held far more complexity than I could have ever imagined.

Now, considering I had been smoking pot almost daily for about four years, the first major mistake involving cannabis finally took place, and let me tell you, it was monumental in its implications. It felt as though I had stumbled into the Bermuda Triangle of bad decisions, where the only thing missing

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was a flashing neon sign proclaiming, “Welcome to Chaos.” What made this incident even more perplexing was that nobody could pinpoint exactly why it all happened, which only added layers of confusion to that already chaotic day. I mean, it was obvious what happened, but how we got there, they had no idea. Classic, right?

It was during junior high, that wonderfully awkward time when everyone is discovering themselves while navigating the exciting waters of adolescence. My parents had invited the extended family over for what was meant to be a delightful gathering. Spoiler alert: it was definitely an experience! With so many family members present, I can’t even recall the specific reason for this particular celebration, but big family gatherings were always a memorable adventure in our household. We often had anywhere from two to three dozen people joining us! It felt like a scene from a lively ensemble cast in a fun reality TV show that just kept bringing the energy, season after season. These vibrant events took place for every occasion imaginable, including our monthly birthday celebrations. After all, we couldn’t possibly celebrate a birthday every week, so we combined them all into a single, joyous, cake-filled extravaganza? I am sure most large families do the same thing. It was the perfect way to enjoy the abundance of cake and the spirited singing because nothing brings a smile quite like the cheerful chorus of family voices, each adding their own flair to the “happy birthday” tune!

This gathering could have easily been one of those joyous occasions filled with laughter, heartfelt conversations, and shared stories, but as per usual, I was well on my way to being high. I had become a master at hiding my altered state of mind, mostly by changing clothes, washing up, and dousing myself in so much Polo cologne or bathroom spray that I was practically a walking air freshener. Seriously, if there were a competition for cologne abuse, I’d have taken home the gold medal. The overpowering scents I cloaked myself in served as a mask, obscuring any chance of someone detecting the telltale signs of my cannabis use. I’d spray it on my clothes

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and even on my hair. Even back then, there were those red eye drops, so nobody was the wiser unless I overdid it and started acting crazy. Plus, I was drowning myself in sugar and soda, which offset the tranquilizing nature of my chili.

As was customary for me during these family events, I navigated the crowd with a delightful mix of exhilaration and paranoia, praying fervently that no one would notice my highness while I mingled among relatives who probably thought I was just a little “off.” I cautiously greeted relatives, exchanged obligatory pleasantries, and laughed at jokes that didn’t quite register in my brain. Every time someone approached me, I felt a surge of anxiety, like a deer caught in headlights, questioning whether they could see through my carefully constructed facade. The laughter of cousins and the chatter of aunts and uncles filled the air, creating a comforting backdrop that sharply contrasted with the panic bubbling beneath the surface of my mind.

As the evening progressed, I couldn’t help but wonder how long I could maintain this ruse before my secret was uncovered. Between my secret hits on a pipe, a Pepsi can, and the contact highs from my parents, the clock was ticking, and with each tick, I felt the pressure mounting. I ended up smoking way too much chili, so I was a ticking time bomb of impending disaster waiting to detonate at any moment. My heart raced, and I could feel the sweat trickling down my back, a physical manifestation of the internal turmoil brewing within me. Each moment felt like a precarious balancing act, teetering between maintaining my composure and succumbing to the overwhelming urge to escape, and then, I was in the bathroom upstairs hurling like a king. It took about 30 minutes and my sweating through my clothes for me to feel decent enough to get back into the game, so I was off to find the other kids.

The Dart.

Who doesn’t love a good game of darts, right? It’s like the Olympics for people who can’t throw a football without risking a trip to the ER. A timeless

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pastime that's perfect for bonding with friends, sharing a few laughs, and justifying your poor life choices after a long day. I can recall a couple of distinct periods in my life when I played darts regularly. One was at a local bar, a shrine to questionable decisions, where a dartboard hung like a sad, neglected trophy. The other was at my buddy Dave's place. He had the charisma of a stand-up comic and a tremendous work ethic. We both slaved away in the quality department of an automotive manufacturing company known for its high standards. He was the data guy, crunching numbers like a math magician, while I was just the tech temp trying not to trip over my own feet.

It took a while for us to truly connect, mostly because I was trying to figure out if he was genuinely funny or dangerously awkward. Our paths first crossed in one of the soul-sucking internal classes he gave on stats, which felt less like education and more like a form of corporate torture. After that, I'd see him around the office, always in the middle of some joke or at least wearing a smile that said, "I'm just here for the paycheck." It wasn't until I snagged a full-time position in his department that the comedy duo was born. We were in different parts of the plant, so our chats were limited to department meetings, where he played the role of the class clown. Thank God for that! His antics turned those snooze fests into something quite entertaining, like a circus act without the elephants.

Fast forward a few years, and our desks were shoved next to each other, marking the beginning of a beautiful friendship, one that involved more NASCAR than I ever thought I'd willingly participate in.

I started showing up at Dave's house for lunch every day, and that's when we became the world's least productive duo. The topic of weed came up, and before long, we were indulging like it was a new food group. We'd spark up during lunch, turning into a pair of giggling idiots for the rest of the day. Dave had a dartboard in his living room, and soon enough, we were playing darts like it was the only thing keeping us from becoming full-time couch potatoes.

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With our minds clouded and reflexes dulled, we often ended up hitting everything but the target: ceiling tiles, family portraits, and I'm fairly sure I almost skewered his cat a couple of times. But hey, it was all in good fun, right? Our lunch breaks grew longer, and our dart games became increasingly ridiculous, like a scene from a buddy cop movie gone wrong.

This became our routine until he decided to retire and move south, probably to escape the darts flying in his direction. We managed to visit him once, and after a meal out, we headed back to his place, only to find that there was no weed. Talk about a buzzkill! It was a stark contrast to our usual shenanigans. Unfortunately, the joy of those earlier days didn't last. We later fell out of touch. We haven't spoken since that visit. Sure, we had our time together and made some great memories.

The air in our small house was thick with the sounds and laughter of our large family gathering, and with so many people crammed into every available space, it was only natural that we kids would seek refuge in the basement. It was our own little sanctuary, a place to escape the chaos above.

Down there, we had a dartboard, and I remember that several of us had gathered around, likely at some point during the evening, to play a few rounds. It was my turn to throw, and typically, I prided myself on being rather good at darts, often coming out on top. But this particular night was destined to go down in infamy.

I took a deep breath, winding up like a baseball pitcher, and then I whipped the dart toward the board with all the strength I could muster. It was an impressive throw, by any measure for sure! As the dart sailed through the air, I felt a surge of hope that it would land perfectly, perhaps even hitting the coveted bullseye, despite the wild nature of my throw. And that hope was not misplaced; it truly was an incredible throw! Incredible in the sense that it could have won an award for "Most Likely to Cause a Family Feud or Death." Congratulations, me!

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In the midst of the excitement, I must have inadvertently closed my eyes, either during or immediately after the throw. What I didn't see, and what would haunt me till this day, was the dart embedding deep into the skull of my cousin Debbie, who had been reaching for the doorknob to leave the room. The moment was surreal, and I can still vividly recall the sound that pierced the air.

Holy cow! It was the highest-pitched squeal I had ever heard, more piercing than anything I had encountered in real life or on TV. It was Debbie, and I had just unwittingly launched a real dart into the side of her head, merely inches from her temple. In an instant, it felt like the entire world was converging upon the basement stairs. Family members rushed down to witness the chaos, and what they encountered was reminiscent of a scene straight out of the horror movie *Carrie*, minus the prom, of course.

The sight was shocking; the entire side of Debbie's head, her face, her sweater, and even her pants were drenched in blood, creating a grotesque tableau that would be etched in my memory forever. I mean, there's family drama, and then there's whatever the hell this was.

The adults quickly sprang into action, hauling her upstairs to the kitchen sink. For some reason, they decided to remove the dart from her head while running cool water over it. The moment they pulled that dart out, a fine yet thick stream of blood erupted, shooting up and over everyone present. It splattered onto the ceiling, the cabinets, and the floors behind them, creating a chaotic scene that was both horrifying and surreal. That was the last thing I remember before everything went dark. I woke up later in my bedroom, disoriented and confused, the echoes of the night still ringing in my ears, probably the sound of my own impending doom as I realized I'd be the family pariah for a while.

That dart incident became a legendary tale within our family, a story that would provide entertainment value for many years to come. It was recounted at gatherings, each retelling adding new layers of drama and

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embellishment, transforming a moment of sheer panic into a cherished family legend.

Chili is a gift from the gods. I have no doubt, and there isn't a soul on earth that could convince me otherwise. Now, that isn't to say that it doesn't have its drawbacks, especially if abused, but for me, the inconvenient drawbacks are well worth any trouble that might come my way. Has it influenced me in a positive way? Yes. Has it influenced me in a negative way? Yes. Do I have regrets? Yup. Would I do it again? Absolutely.

We only do this life thing once. There is no perfect life. Just be you and make the best of it.