

THE MAN WHO NEVER WANTED A DOG

2025 V Le Chenz

A wagging tail, a sloppy kiss, a playful bark, most people look at that and think, “Oh, what a loving companion!” Meanwhile, I’m over here thinking, “Welcome to my personal hell, folks!” Seriously, I’m a card-carrying member of this miserable little club that feels more like a secret society of dog haters. I already regret spilling that, but while my friends are gushing over their “fur babies” and cooing about ridiculous chew toys, I’m clutching my Dunkin’ coffee like it’s a life raft in a tsunami of tail-wagging and slobbering.

Everywhere I look, dogs seem to have better personalities than my closest friends, and me, for that matter. It feels like my life has turned into a scripted comedy where I’m just this awkward, bewildered extra in a world filled with these furry little divas.

As my buddies hyped up their dog stories, I couldn’t help but notice the twinkle in their eyes and as I was drifting through my neighborhood, I could hear the sound of kids laughing and the occasional dog barking as if auditioning for a role in a horror movie. That bark? Oh, that’s Tonto. Let me tell you about Tonto. He wasn’t your typical pet; he was more like a stray spirit that decided our house was the coolest hangout spot.

Tonto was a shepherd mix, a wild cocktail of dogs that perfectly matched his over-the-top personality. His fluffy coat shone like it was dipped in gold every time the sun hit it, and those eyes. Oh man, they had that mischievous glint that screamed, “Get ready for some chaos, buddy!” He strutted around our yard like he was the king of the castle, tail wagging like a flag announcing his nonstop quest for trouble. The neighborhood? They knew him as the lovable little hellraiser, the self-declared ambassador of canine shenanigans.

While I was stuck doing homework or chores like some sort of prison sentence, Tonto was out there living his best life. I remember the first time I caught him making a break for it. My heart sank like I had just lost a bet, only to see him zipping across the grass like he was training for the dog Olympics, heading straight for Mrs. Sudel’s house. “Tonto!” I yelled, half

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annoyed and half laughing. Honestly, that's just how it went every time he pulled one of his stunts, an emotional rollercoaster I didn't sign up for.

Tonto strutted around like he was the headliner at a rock concert. This dude had "runaway" status down to an art form, like he was on a red carpet at some Hollywood premiere. You could practically see the spotlight on him, collecting treats and pats from the neighbors like they were his adoring fans. "Look! There's Tonto!" Mr. Brandt yelled, waving, and Tonto? He was eating it up, tail wagging like it was on a sugar rush, happily scarfing down leftover steak from the King's backyard barbecue. What a life!

From a window, I looked out, feeling a weird mix of jealousy and laughter. Here I was, struggling with basic math like I was trying to crack the Da Vinci Code, while my dog was out there living a better life! He was conquering grills and charming the pants off everyone he met. That infamous "Tonto smile" of his? Unbelievable, a toothy grin that screamed kindness and adventure wrapped up in fur. And when he returned home, you better believe he'd swiped a few tasty treasures, maybe a hot dog or chicken breast.

It became a routine in our house. Tonto would waltz back, panting like he just ran a marathon, with a little extra fluff in his belly, as if he had won the ice cream lottery. I remember one Sunday, I stumbled upon a group in the park, all animated, probably arguing over who had the best dog. One woman pointed at the empty ice cream cones littered around her feet and cracked up, saying, "Your dog took my scoop!" I mean, come on! Just another day in the life of Tonto, right? And I could hear myself saying, "That's just Tonto", like that was some kind of excuse. Like, "Hey, he's not a criminal; he's just living the dream!"

Despite my annoyance, I couldn't help but admire the way this dog zipped through town, leaving a trail of laughter and crumbs like some sort of deranged fairy. Before you knew it, he was the town legend, the jokester everyone loved to bits. The only thing he loved more than exploring was crashing into someone else's sunny spot like a lazy cat. You'd hear the

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gossip flying around like a game of telephone: “Did you see Tonto sprawled out on the Jones’s steps?” or “I think he’s in a high-stakes squirrel-chasing showdown at the park!”

Sometimes, I envied his carefree existence. I was trapped in the hellhole of adolescence, where algebra was my arch-nemesis, and everyone else’s opinion felt like a freakin’ anvil hanging over my head. Meanwhile, there he was, living in the moment like a tornado of joyful chaos.

As I watched him get older, I started to see his little adventures differently, not as a pain in the ass, but as a blessing. Tonto wasn’t just some furry buddy; he was a reminder that joy is often just outside our front door, an enthusiastic nudge to dive into life, take risks, and chill under the sun like you’ve got no problems at all.

There was something downright magical about the way he strutted around, tail wagging like he just won the lottery, ears flopping like they were in a rock band, spreading happiness like it was his full-time job. And there he was, following me around like a shadow, whether I wanted him there or not. I finally figured it out: this little dude was the beacon of joy I didn’t know I needed. He showed me that real adventure and happiness come from blazing our own trails, tongue hanging out and heart wide open, ready to take on the world.

Then one day, Tonto just vanished. Poof! Like a magician’s trick gone wrong. One minute he was there, and the next, it was like he decided to take a permanent vacation from the whole Wild West nonsense. This guy was my shadow, my tagalong, whether I wanted him there or not, and my therapist before I even knew what that was. I can still see him: shiny dark brown coat, big soulful eyes that understood me better than anyone else ever could. But you know how it goes; time, that relentless bastard, drags you along, and Tonto slipped away, leaving me with an emptiness in my chest, a hole I never thought I’d have to deal with.

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The first few days, we were all wrapped in a bizarre kind of loneliness. I'd roam into the woods behind our new place, waiting for Tonto to come bounding out like some over-caffeinated rabbit. I'd stand there, calling for him, half-hoping he'd come flying out, tail wagging like a propeller, ready to tackle me with joy. But nah, all I got was silence, just me and the trees, echoing back my own pathetic longing.

The days dragged on, weeks turned into months, and he just never showed up. I can still see the panic in my mom's eyes as we plastered "Missing Pet" posters all over the neighborhood like we were searching for a lost kid. I remember the lump in my throat when I heard her voice shaking as she asked the neighbors if they'd seen him. She was stuck in a weird limbo, torn between hope and complete heartbreak. But me? I was never the type to get all mushy. Well, I was. I was most definitely, but after Elvis died when I was ten, I shoved my feelings down like a damn rock in my chest. I loved Elvis! My father's friend, Brad, used to give me guitar lessons and gave me almost all of Elvis's original albums! I had them all! Hurricane Hugo took them all away from me.

Years later, I got the news. My old man was strolling along the hillside and riverbank, when he tripped over Tonto's bones, all bleached out and laid bare by time and Mother Nature. They say that even in that skeleton form, my vibrant little buddy managed to say something to him. My dad, tough as nails and always on the ball, recognized those bones right away. He got it, the connection we had, even though I decided to shove mine deep down and pretend it didn't exist.

The image of Tonto's skeleton haunted me, not just because the poor guy was a bag of bones picked clean by time, but because it felt like a punch in the gut, a reminder of all those moments I chickened out. I wish I'd told him I loved him, let myself soak in the joy he brought instead of holding back like a scared kid. I remember my dad, the tough guy, sharing what he found with a heavy heart, all choked up, even though he was never one to get mushy. There was this thick silence wrapped around us like a fog while we

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both mourned in our own awkward ways. Oh, and that time my dad beat the shit out of him for biting my sister. FYI, that was the last time he ever laid a hand on him. Tonto was his best friend. I just wanted to make that crystal clear.

His name was Milton, and he lived right down the street. Not exactly the cool kid, you know? More like lean, scrawny type with thick glasses, the classic nerd stereotype. This guy didn't get along with anyone. He was the kind of kid who left paper bags filled with dog poop in the street or on someone's stoop like it was his version of a love letter. Tonto was found about a hundred feet from his property line by the Byram River. I'm telling you; I'm convinced he killed Tonto. He probably lured him into the woods with promises of treats or some nonsense. I can't prove it, but deep down, I know it was him.

I still think about Tonto. You know those quiet evenings when the light's fading, and the shadows are stretching out like they're trying to escape? I regret not appreciating the time we had together, just because he was an outdoor dog who always smelled like... well, dog. This guy turned our house into a total disaster zone, barked like a lunatic, and I was stuck playing poop-scooper every day. But this beautiful creature would've given his life for any one of us, and what did I do? I couldn't have cared less. What the hell was wrong with me?

A few years later, my world flipped again when my mom came home with a squirmy little creature that turned out to be an energetic Shih Tzu puppy named Fletcher! The whole family was buzzing with excitement, while I was paralyzed by a crippling fear of actually engaging with him. When I held him for the first time, his soft, warm little body nestled in my palms, and I still wanted nothing to do with him. Why? I knew exactly why. If I wanted to avoid getting hurt, I should just keep my distance, right? I was about to head off to college, thinking that would make everything easier. But that part of the story? Yeah, I'll save that for another time.

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My most glaring memory of Fletcher is seared into my brain like a bad tattoo. It was the day my dad, overwhelmed by a puddle on the dining room floor, literally threw our new little buddy out the front door. He picked him up like a softball pitcher readying his pitch, swung open the screen door, and underhanded Fletcher about ten feet into the yard. "Holy cow!" We all freaked out, sprinting to see if he was still alive.

"Dad! What the crack?" Those words shot out of all of us like fireworks. I could see Fletcher's little body backlit by the door, eyes all bugged out and confused, letting out a yelp as he hit the ground outside. Even now, I can still picture him limping on that right front leg; it was both gut-wrenching and downright hilarious. He just had a little sprain, but my dad's reputation as "The Scary Giant"? Yeah, that took a nosedive.

From that day on, until Fletcher passed away, every time he laid eyes on my dad, he'd start limping. It turned into an inside joke for us, like some twisted sitcom. For years, we cracked up about how our little furry buddy had turned my dad into the villain of his own house! Sure, what Dad did wasn't exactly a stand-up routine, and Fletcher wasn't really injured, but hey, it was a story that brought some much-needed laughter to a family that could use a good chuckle now and then.

But the laughter faded way too fast. I didn't get to spend as much time with Fletcher as I should have. College pulled me away, and every time I came home, it felt like he had aged ten years. I cherished the fleeting moments we had together, the soft clink of his collar and his contented sighs on the couch beside me. He was a good dog, through and through, a loyal companion whose boundless energy reminded me of simpler times. But once again, I didn't give him the time of day.

Then one day, I got the news that my mom put Fletcher down because of his inoperable spinal cancer. She was a mess, and I was left sitting there, thinking, "Great, here we go again, letting another bright light slip through my fingers." All because I couldn't be bothered to deal with some dirt and didn't want to get hurt. Classic me, right?

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My mom's voice shook like a leaf in a hurricane as she told me about that day. "He couldn't walk anymore, sweetheart," she said, all choked up. "He was suffering. He was spending hours each day scratching his back on the underside of the coffee table". Tears streamed down her face, and my heart shattered too because now I had two dogs and two gigantic losses. "Me 0, dogs 2," I thought, drowning in shame. What is it about the love of a dog that hits so hard? They waltz into our lives, all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, just to leave us with these massive holes filled with memories. Where the hell were my holes? I wondered. So, here's to Fletcher, the little Shih Tzu who tried to remind me that love, no matter how short-lived, is always worth the agony of saying goodbye.

It is my 'newness' that makes me look like a total goofball. My wife says I am a brand-new soul, never been around the block, not even once. But I couldn't pin all my problems on being the rookie. Trust me, I would've loved to if I could. Anything to make me look better? Sign me up!

Nothing has ever come easy for me, not even the stuff that most people just get, you know? The average Joe can figure out simple things, and here I am, tripping over my own shoelaces. But hey, I've got common sense, and that's saved my ass more times than I can count. I take pride in my ability to learn just about anything, as long as I'm thrown into the fire. Give me an immersive training experience, and I'm golden, especially since I'm one of those visual learners. But honestly, was it all this weirdness in my personality that kept me from seeing the value of having a dog in the family?

Most things didn't hit me right away, you know? Brand-new soul over here, clueless. Here's a good one: I was 16, and my grandfather's brother and his friend were in town. They lived in Venice, California, and drove an 18-wheeler for a living. I'd known them my whole life, and I loved seeing them when they visited. Everyone else got it, but me? Not a clue. My uncle's friend was Chuck; we called him Chuckles. He was the more feminine one; my uncle was not at all. Still, it never crossed my mind that they were gay. I

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had no clue, even up to the very minute before I was supposed to join them on their ride back to California to spend the summer.

So, while I am waiting to depart, my dad casually strolled up to me and asked if I knew they were gay. It still didn't click! Yep, still me, brand-spanking-new. My only question was, "Do they sleep in the same bed?" And he goes, "How many beds do they have?", I said, "They told me they have one bed, and I have to sleep on the couch." Nothing was clicking yet, even at this point. Finally, he had to break it down for me: "They're a couple, and they have sex!" Oh my God...

I tried to dodge the whole pet thing, but every now and then, I thought, "What the hell, let's give this a shot." I knew I wasn't ready for a dog, I mean, come on, that's a whole relationship! So, I went with cats. Twice. And both times? Epic disasters. Me: 0, cats: 2. The last one? That little jerk decided my pillow was his personal urinal! Pets? The "normal" ones? Yeah, not for me, and they never will be.

So, let me tell you about another little adventure I had. I was living in Stamford, CT, working at a restaurant, and out of nowhere, I got hit with this illness. I was pretty sure I caught salmonella from canned cat food or my kitchen; yeah, I know, right? I worked in a restaurant, so that could have been it, too. So, there I am, glued to the toilet for days, feeling like my insides are staging a rebellion. It was brutal! When the pain got so bad I thought I was going to pass out, I finally dragged myself to the ER. I went, what, four or five times before they finally admitted me? It took them another couple of days to figure out it was salmonella.

A doctor looks at me and asks how I think I might've got this lovely prize. I go, "Hey, could it be from cat food? You know, canned cat food?" And he just stares at me like I'm a complete moron and goes, "You eat cat food?" I'm like, "No, man! But I'm not exactly keeping my place very tidy." That got a decent laugh from the crew. My awkwardness stretched across both the human and animal kingdoms. Seriously, how do other people pull this off?

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It was probably a solid ten years before I even got close to another dog. My dad's dog, Humphrey. Honestly, my old man and I were like oil and water. He loved all the dirt and chaos that came with having a dog. He was the guy who would pick a huge swollen tick off a dog and squeeze it between his fingers until it exploded. Disgusting!

I only saw Humphrey a handful of times while my dad had him, and let me tell you, those encounters were a little terrifying. This dog was a solid 75 pounds of pure muscle, and he could smell my fear from a mile away. He knew I didn't like him, and I definitely knew he didn't like me. More than once, I felt that close brush with his teeth while my dad was over there saying, "Don't do that!" to me. lol

Then, listen to this one... At one point, I was crashing with my folks in Southern California, because I had absolutely no clue what the hell I was doing with my life. All I knew was I wanted to be rich and famous. Classic, right? We were living in Leucadia, near Encinitas, perched on the cliffs looking out at the ocean. Beautiful spot, but what the hell was I supposed to do with my life? I was sick to death of working in restaurants, but when you drop out of college and have a resume that reads like a toddler's drawing, your options are pretty limited. No doubt about it.

That said, for some insane reason, I thought it would be a brilliant idea to trek up into the Sequoias to apply for a live-in nanny gig... for a dog! Yes, you heard that right, a dog! I thought I could pull the wool over their eyes. I figured, "Hey, maybe I can learn to love these little furballs and turn my life around." I used to want to be an actor, so lying? That's basically my second language. I decided to call for an interview. After a few days of waiting, I jumped into my 1981 280ZX and hit the road. Six-hour drive, folks. That's six hours of me questioning every life choice that led me to this moment.

It was a long drive and thank God I didn't have any prostate issues yet, or I would have been stopping every five minutes like an old man! But I finally made it up there with only a couple of pit stops. The setting? Incredible!

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This cabin was nestled among the Redwoods and had a view of the giant Sequoias that made you want to hug a tree or something.

I wanted this job, but let's be real; I knew there was no chance in hell I'd get it. I think I just needed to get out of the house. I mean, dog people have this sixth sense, like some kind of dog-sniffing radar. You know what I'm talking about? They can just smell it on you.

It was painfully obvious I knew nothing about dogs while I was chatting with this woman. I wasn't even clever enough to stash some treats in my pockets. The dog's name was Sunshine, big, furry, and sweet as hell, but if you asked me about her breed, I'd just give you a blank stare. I was in and out of there in ten minutes like a bad magician. I didn't expect a callback, so I started my trek home, stopping for a bite to eat along the way.

This was my second time in Bakersfield. The first time was just a few hours ago, and let me tell you, I'm still not impressed. I just survived a dog-sitting interview near Sequoia, an interview that screamed, "Yeah, buddy, you're definitely not the chosen one." My spirits were already lower than the hopes of the folks living in Bakersfield.

As I pulled off Highway 99, the air slapped me in the face like a hot, dusty blanket made of despair and exhaust fumes. It wasn't just hot; it was the kind of heat that made you question if breathable air was a myth, like Bigfoot or a good relationship. My car, which had heroically transported me through the majestic redwoods of Sequoia just hours ago, now felt like a convection oven on wheels, slowly turning me into a well-done human roast. I half-expected to see mirages of polar bears chilling with iced lattes, but nope, just another endless stretch of almond orchards, mocking my existence.

My mission was simple: to find some food that could slap the existential dread Bakersfield oozed right out of me. I wasn't looking for gourmet nonsense; just anything that hadn't already been chewed up by the sun. The first time around, I grabbed a quick, forgettable cup of coffee, trying to bail

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before the city could fully tattoo itself on my brain. Yeah, real foolish optimism there. Bakersfield, like that annoying ex you thought you could escape, knew I'd be back.

The fast-food joints stood there, their neon signs flickering like they were trying too hard to get my attention in this godforsaken haze of an afternoon. Each place promised me a greasy hug, like, "Hey, buddy, forget your problems for a minute!" Yeah, right. I was stuck in Bakersfield again, and the options were a burger that would probably taste like a bad decision, tacos that looked like they might explode, or a chicken sandwich that resembled a dehydrated sponge. My stomach growled, sounding like a sad, desperate plea for the artisanal sourdough and fresh mountain air I'd ditched for this culinary nightmare.

I finally caved and hit up a drive-thru, mostly because the idea of stepping out into that hellish heat felt like a personal attack. So, there I was, stuck in line, surrounded by pickup trucks and the distant drone of oil pumps, when a light bulb went off in my head. Bakersfield wasn't just a place; it was a frickin' state of mind. It was the vibe of being gridlocked on a Tuesday, the taste of coffee that's been sitting out too long, and the sound of a siren that never gets any closer, just teasing you. It was the complete opposite of that glorious, dog-friendly paradise I thought I was going to snag.

My food arrived, lukewarm and uninspiring, just like my dog-sitting prospects. I scarfed it down, my eyes darting around like a paranoid squirrel, searching for any sign of escape, any glimmer of a road that would lead me out of this Central Valley purgatory. As I merged back onto the highway, the setting sun threw long, orange shadows over the flat landscape. I'll give Bakersfield that; it knows how to put on a beautiful sunset. But even the sun seemed eager to bounce. My second visit came to an end, and my impression was solidified: Bakersfield is a place you drive through, not a place you hang out in. Especially when I'm already weighed down by the realization that I'm not even good enough for a dog.

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"Stop. Stop! STOP following me!" I kept mumbling to myself while my wife shot me that look, rolling her eyes like she was watching a two-hour documentary on paint drying. She reminded me yet again that this guy would always, always trail me.

Now, because I despised the dog-hating part of myself so much, I thought, "Hey, let's get a dog!" Yeah, brilliant idea, right? I figured it would force me to face my feelings and, eventually, I'd become a dog lover. To make it a bit easier on my twisted psyche, I thought, "Why not get a puppy for our seven-year-old as a gift?" Smart move, huh? This way, the dog would belong to him, and by extension, my wife. I'd just be the reluctant dog helper, trying to work on my nonexistent dog-loving skills. Deep down, I knew this was a terrible decision, but I convinced myself it was the right thing to do.

We settled on this long-haired shorty Jack Russell Terrier named Jett. When we first laid eyes on him, I swear he looked like a ferret. I was half convinced we were adopting a rodent, not a dog. But we took him home anyway. And let me tell you, raising that little furball was way harder than raising a human kid, no contest. I'm telling you: don't force yourself into being a dog person. You either are one and you know it, or you're not, and you definitely know it. If you're in the middle, watch your toes.

I was stuck in this weird limbo. We had Jett for a few years before my health problems decided to stage a freakin' invasion, one after another like they were in a bad horror movie. I've had migraines my whole life, but then they started clustering like a bunch of angry bees and just obliterating me on the regular. There were stretches where I was sporting a migraine every day for two or three months! I was just trying to grind it out, support my family, and love a dog that I was basically ghosting at that point. The pain, the meds, the stress, it was like a never-ending circus of misery. I had no idea how I was going to drag myself from one day to the next.

I was spiraling into depression, pushing everyone away like they were some kind of toxic waste. I knew I was letting everyone down, but I just couldn't shake it off. I was stuck in this pit, just marinating in anger and sadness.

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Then, boom! Out of nowhere, another health issue hit me. Perfect, right? Just what I needed!

Then one morning, like any other, I got hit with this sudden, searing pain in my left arm that flipped my life upside down. It wasn't just a little ache; it felt like a lightning bolt of agony zapping right through me! I'm screaming at my wife like she's a NASCAR driver, "Get me to the emergency room, now!" She's getting annoyed at me because I am screaming at her to drive me, so she says she won't drive me! So, for the next few minutes, we were just standing there yelling at each other for no reason. I was screaming because of the pain!

Once we arrived at the hospital, the doctors took a look at me and bam! They hit me with the diagnosis: a herniated disc in my neck. Now, for those who aren't exactly anatomy buffs, your spine is basically a tall stack of bones, like a Jenga tower made of vertebrae, cushioned by these squishy little rubbery discs. So, when one of those bad boys decides to rupture, it's like the jelly filling in a donut going rogue, pushing out and squashing the nerves or even the spinal cord. And let me tell you, that's a one-way ticket to a world of hurt. That's what was sending agony shooting down my arm like I was trying to high-five a cactus.

So, the medical team, those geniuses, recommended I undergo surgery, a discectomy to remove the messed-up disc and relieve the pressure on my nerve. I tried to be tough, thinking physical therapy and some heavy-duty pain meds would do the trick. But let me tell you, the chronic pain and that nerve acting like it was auditioning for a horror movie never got better. So here I am, left with no choice but to bite the bullet and go under the knife. Fantastic, right?

Here's the deal: this was about fifteen years ago. I went into surgery, thinking I'd finally kick this neck pain to the curb. But nope! Instead, I ended up with this lovely, persistent, chronic neck pain. Isn't that a kick in the teeth? It turns out, I'm not alone in this mess. Numerous studies indicate that a significant number of people who undergo spinal surgery end up with

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new or ongoing pain. It's like a bad sequel to a movie nobody wanted in the first place. Why does this happen? Well, there's scar tissue throwing a party, new injuries crashing the scene, and this delightful phenomenon called "adjacent segment disease." Essentially, the poor vertebrae above and below the fusion are like, "Hey, we're stressed out too!" and start to crumble under the pressure. It's a real circus, folks!

Fifteen years after my first surgery, I found myself in the same hell. The new pain was relentless. Imaging revealed that two more discs had thrown in the towel and needed to be removed. This time, it hit harder than a hangover after a night of bad decisions. The surgeries piled up like a bad relationship, and the chronic pain, forget about it. I couldn't hold down a regular job anymore. Consistent schedule? Ha! I was more unreliable than a Netflix series after season one. Physical tasks? Yeah, good luck with that. It was a brutal, life-altering trip. I had to reevaluate everything, like, how do you navigate a world that treats you like a broken-down car on the side of the road?

Look, I know I haven't been the best friend, son, or partner, and I'm not here to throw a pity party. But let's be real for a second. My childhood and school years were brutal. We're talking about a horror show that shaped the mess you see today. So yeah, I'm a work in progress, but I'm trying to figure it out.

I've got a laundry list of regrets and, you know, those "skeletons in the closet," like a freakin' horror movie in there. I wasn't exactly a picnic to be around as a kid; let's just say I owned my past mistakes like a bad tattoo. But, man, I also went through some serious crap. I was getting my face rearranged at school regularly, and guess what? The beatings didn't stop when school was over. The camps and clubs I were part of. A living hell, just a cesspool of bullying and cruelty. On top of all that, I had a killer acne situation that made me feel like a walking pizza face, just begging for ridicule. It was like I was under siege from all angles, and I carried that pain and rage around with me like a backpack full of bricks for years.

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Looking back, it's clear I turned those traumatic experiences into my own personal get-out-of-jail-free card to shove people away before they could do me any harm. I built fortress-like walls, thinking I was some kind of medieval knight protecting myself. But guess what? I ended up shutting out the very people who wanted to help. I couldn't go back and rewrite the past, but I figured I could at least try to make sense of it, like a therapist with a bad attitude, and use that understanding to maybe, just maybe, build a better future. So, I dove into the long, painful process of demolishing those walls and learning how to let people in. It was brutal but necessary if I wanted any shot at healthy, loving relationships.

The relentless, soul-crushing pain in my spine and the barrage of migraines I've endured have completely altered my existence. It's like living in a twisted version of reality, and to top it off, I've got a few upcoming herniated discs just waiting for me to schedule some delightful surgery. Awesome, right?

My migraines were a different kind of monster. My neurologist told me they are essentially little strokes. These weren't just your run-of-the-mill headaches; they hijacked my senses and left me flat on my back, utterly useless. And then there's the arthritis, creeping in like an unwanted guest, especially around my surgical sites. Even the simplest movements became epic battles. Turning my head? Forget about it! It was like trying to move a boulder. I knew it was only a matter of time before I had to throw in the towel on driving altogether.

And as if all that wasn't enough, my body decided to start cranking out kidney stones. Oh, just what I needed! And let me tell you, the pain from those was often worse than the spine issues and the migraines. Unbelievable.

I've been through so many stents over the years that I could start a support group. But let me tell you, there's one night that still haunts me like no other. I had just gotten a stent installed the day before, and I was definitely feeling all the delightful post-stent discomfort. I get a lot of it, and a lot of pain. I

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have to take oxycodone. The little string they leave hanging out. It's like a cruel joke from a sadistic doctor; it makes you feel like you have to pee every five seconds! Don't move... Just fantastic, right? But on that rainy night, that little tether turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

Somehow, the stent shifted, and I started leaking urine, a small, constant drip. I looked up at the ceiling and thought, "Really, God? What's next? A rainstorm of my own pee?" Since it was just a little dribble, I thought, "Alright, I can handle this. I'll tough it out and hit the hospital in the morning." Oh, what a naive idiot I was! I hadn't had a drink in hours, but my body thought I was downing a forty!

I tried sitting on a pile of bath towels. Twenty minutes in, soaked. My poor wife had to run to the store in the middle of the night for adult diapers. Yeah, you heard me, diapers. So, I slapped one on, and it felt like a medieval torture device. I thought, "Alright, this is going to buy me some time." An hour later, that thing was packed to the brim. This was not going to cut it.

So, there I was, sitting on the toilet with my Urologist on speakerphone and I asked her, "Do I come in? What's the plan here?" And the solution she gave me? I swear, I almost cried. There's no way I can do that! But with urine leaking everywhere and a soaked diaper on the floor, what do I do? I was clearly left with no other choice!

With my doctor's voice echoing throughout the bathroom, I shed every piece of clothing and stepped into the tub. Eyes wider than they have ever been. I leaned back against the shower wall, trying to catch my breath, repeating, "You can do this. Don't be a little bitch." Honestly, I didn't think I'd ever be ready for this, but I took a deep breath and finally said, "Alright, I'm ready."

She guided me through it, telling me to take my time, be gentle. So, I'm there, slowly grabbing the end of this tether like I'm about to pull a rabbit out of a hat. After about a minute, I was convinced they'd tied the other end to my kidney because it was not moving! My junk was stretched out like a

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damn turkey's neck, and I was waiting for it to break off! I thought that any second, my kidney would try to ripple its way down into my bladder and out through my D. I almost started crying, and I would have if I wasn't already teared up from the god damn fear! The panic? Unforgettable and absolutely brutal.

For years, I thought I was just one bad day away from checking out. I'm talking **fifteen years** of relentless pain and daily migraines, the kind that felt like a tiny little guy in my skull ringing a bell with a hammer. It was like a twisted version of a carnival ride I never asked to be on! But hey, they've eased up for now. I'm not naive enough to think they've packed their bags and left for good, but I'll take the peace while it lasts.

Now, all those meds I'd been on, those little pills and potions that were supposed to help me, ended up doing more damage than a hurricane at a lemonade stand. It's like hiring a construction crew to fix a leak in my roof. They fixed the leak, sure, but then they went and smashed every window and wrecked the foundation just because they felt like it! What the hell, right?

I had to start shutting down my emotions just to survive the pain. It wasn't even a conscious choice; it just happened. My emotional circuitry went haywire. I lost all personal connections to anyone except my wife and son. It wasn't just that I stopped calling people; I did that too, but the deeper connections? They just... evaporated. I forgot almost everyone. The love, the interest, the feelings I had for friends and family. Gone. Just... poof. I'd never been great with people anyway. When I met someone and we clicked, I'd start this little countdown in my head, waiting for the moment they'd think, "Oh, I need to get away from this guy." And, of course, I was right every single time. So, I just learned to accept it as a bad habit.

But here's the kicker: everything I did, whether I meant to or not, kept me close to the two most important people in my life: my wife and my kid. For that, I'm thankful. However, I still regret pushing everyone else away, and I feel bad about it. I know I can't make excuses, but getting out of bed every

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day felt like fighting a bear. I'm sure there are folks out there in the same boat who are handling it like pros, but they're not me. I'm me. Trust me, I tried to be anyone but myself. I became desperate and furious about not being able to work and support my family. Suddenly, I was a ghost, just a useless sack of bones wandering around. And let me tell you, that was a tough pill to swallow, no joke.

This was the hand I was dealt, alright? For most of us guys, the poor schmucks like you and me, we wanted to be strong. We wanted to be the rock. We wanted to take care of our families, make sure they didn't have to suffer, and help make their dreams come true. That was real. It was built into the operating system.

I had that same goal, you know? I worked my ass off, busted my hump. We got a multi-family place, another house; we were on the right track. I was going to be the hero, just for once. I needed to be the goddamn hero, and what happens? I flopped!

And what happened after that? I was hit with a wave of feeling completely inadequate, like I was just a walking failure. It cranked everything up to eleven. I felt demasculated, emasculated, whatever you want to call it. I couldn't shake this nagging feeling of being utterly useless. Everything I did, even just sitting on my ass, was a constant reminder of the pain I'd caused. I was putting stress on everyone, spending money like a drunken sailor trying to fix things, get us back on track, just to feel relevant in my own damn life again. It was a goddamn nightmare.

An update from my body, folks: I now also have three hernias, pre-diabetes, and had a widow-maker heart attack. Add them to the mix! A widow-maker! That's the one they named after the outcome! You hear that name, and you're supposed to think, "Well, that's it! Goodnight, everybody! It was a hell of a ride!"

You'd think all this would push me right over the edge, right? Like I'd finally snap and start screaming at the sky? But you'd be wrong. Dead wrong. I

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was an absolute mess, no denying that. But you know what? I was still here, goddammit! I was still here!

Jesus, what a wake-up call! I got smacked upside my head with a big ol' dose of reality after that heart attack fiasco. I'm not gonna lie; my body's falling apart faster than I ever imagined. For nearly two decades, I've been in a goddamn war with chronic pain and depression. That combo? It's like being a worn-out rug instead of a human being.

But here's the kicker: it took about six months; I could hardly wrap my head around it. I felt better, physically, than I had in almost 15 years! My neck was still a royal pain in the ass, but screw it, everything else felt like a miracle. I was moving, I was doing stuff, I was finally off my lazy butt! Sure, it was a classic case of "too little, too late," but you know what? I'd take this second chance any way I could get it!

And it got even better! My depression? Gone. Poof! For years, every single day was like a brutal internal war just to put on pants and, God forbid, keep them on, you know what I mean? Now, my pants were on from sunrise to sunset. I was out in the yard for hours, and I didn't even flinch at the thought of running to the store for anything my family needed. I figured out that I could get so much more done if I was already dressed and ready for action. No more wrestling with myself over the Herculean task of swapping pajamas for "grown-up pants." My mind was clear, and for the first time in forever, I was actually making plans. It felt unbelievable, like I'd been plugged back into the world after being in a coma for a decade.

You were probably sitting there thinking, "Oh, I know what happened. This dude finally found that magic tonic from some sketchy Facebook ad promising to cure everything from erectile dysfunction to being a miserable jerk." Or maybe you thought I finally swallowed my pride and started meditating. You'd be dead wrong, my friend. This ain't some new-age mumbo jumbo or a miracle pill. The whole transformation, this new lease on life? I owe almost all of it to one beautiful, loving, four-legged buddy, a Jack Russell named Jett.

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And I'm not kidding you. That little maniac was the best medicine I could've ever asked for. The moment I brought him home; he was on a mission. He wouldn't let me sit on my ass all day, wallowing in self-pity. He needed to be walked. He needed to be played with. He needed to go outside and sniff every single blade of grass in a three-mile radius. And guess who got to go with him? That's right. Me. I went from being a goddamn human-sized potato to a guy actually moving around, doing things, and getting a little fresh air. It was amazing what a little dog could do to a man's routine.

I forced myself to get up every single day. I couldn't just lay there and stare at the ceiling anymore. This little guy looked at me with those big, pleading eyes like, "Hey, what are we doing today? Let's get out of this house and chase a squirrel!" And for the first time in ages, I actually listened to him. He wasn't just a pet; he was my goddamn personal trainer, my therapist, and my alarm clock all rolled into one tiny, furry package. It was a miracle, I tell ya. A tiny, furry, barking miracle!

Listen, this wasn't some overnight transformation, alright? It was a slow burn, a five-year slog of tiny, incremental steps with a whole lot of faceplants along the way. I had my good days, but then I'd hit a week where I'd slide right back into being a useless lump on the couch. But the last 12 months? That's when the real change kicked in, and it was all thanks to Jett. And I say that as a guy who still, on some days, struggles with the whole "dog owner" thing. I mean, I now embraced dog life, at least partially. Maybe it was a 60/40 split, with the dog totally winning, but hey, I thought that was a decent place to be. It was an improvement, what can I say? I wasn't the guy dressing his dog up in a little sweater, but I'll admit, the little guy had wormed his way into my heart. I can tell you that I am still most definitely me because if I see another person walking their dog in my direction, I will avoid them like they were an enemy assassin. I still have not overcome my need to avoid other dog walkers at all costs.

My journey started with the simplest things, right? Like actually talking to him. I mean, I started talking to him like I would my wife or my kid, well, not

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exactly that, but more like a person and it was a huge step. I plopped down on the couch and just started ranting. “Hey, you see this idiot on TV? This freakin’ guy...” And he just sat there, staring at me with those beady little eyes like he got every word. Way better than talking to a wall, I’ll tell you that. Then something wild happened. One day, instead of shooing him away, I actually invited him to tag along. “Alright, you little menace, let’s roll.” And from that moment on, everything changed. We started walking. We started napping. We started yapping. We even went “glamping,” which was a real eye-opener.

“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 the Olympic sprint of avoiding punishment. 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 warmth radiating from the asphalt beneath our feet, each step a reminder that the universe was intent on roasting us alive. We dove into the searing Toyota Corolla, the metal of the door burning against our skin.

As we settled into our seats, our thighs protested against the unforgiving plastic, which 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 rushing wind filled the car, drowning out the chaos of our morning as we struggled to buckle our seatbelts while fanning ourselves like we were auditioning for a scene in a twisted summer camp horror flick.

My brother, a whirlwind of energy and excitement, began to chatter animatedly about our destination, utterly oblivious to the mounting frustration radiating from our mother. I stole a glance at her, noting the

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furrow in her brow and the way her fingers tapped impatiently against the steering wheel as if she were trying to summon a genie to escape this hellscape. 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, unless losing meant winning.

It was an incredibly hot summer day in the small town of Glenville, a suburb of Greenwich, where the heat wrapped around you like an annoying relative who overstays their stay. The year was 1977, and I was just 10 years old, bursting with energy likely fueled by the sugar rush from the cereal I devoured that morning. With school out for a couple more weeks, the anticipation of summer adventures bubbled inside us kids like soda shaken too much, just waiting to explode all over our parents' new carpet. 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, surrounded by the comforting hum of air conditioners and the steady whir of fans, our only allies in this battle against the sun. Movies 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, like a bad marriage.

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

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dad, usually a calm presence, was the loudest of the bunch, his frustration echoing through the room like a thunderclap; seriously, you'd think the world was ending, he might as well have started a support group for families without cable. 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 Glenville? I wondered if the townspeople's collective outburst might have registered on the Richter scale, shaking the very foundations of our sleepy little community. 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, we 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 because nothing says "I love you" like a slightly cooler car. As we pulled away, we headed down the street and turned 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, thanks, Dad.

Riversville Road stretched out before us, a long and winding path 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 sweating to death? We passed Baliwick and had been on the road for about five minutes, with the windows sealed tight, when my father

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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 eyebrows, or rather, the lack thereof, as her beady little eyes narrowed into 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.

In a panic, we hastily rolled the windows back up, as if our very lives depended on it, because, at that moment, they truly 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, leaving us to fend for ourselves, which, in backcountry Greenwich, wouldn't be too bad! 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, as if we were in some kind of twisted magic show where the only trick was our parents disappearing into thin air. 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 in trouble 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 I was just kidding. We all

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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, 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 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, Mary Jane, skyrocketed, completely transforming me into something like a stealthy ninja, because, you know, nothing screams "ninja" quite like a kid hunting for a hidden stash. My senses heightened to an almost supernatural level; I began to obsess over every secretive, hidden spot where my dad stashed 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.

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It became my personal mission, a quest of sorts, to immerse myself in those pop-up smoky rooms that multiplied like rabbits in a pet store. Each one was more inviting than the last, resembling a five-star resort for stoners. 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 elementary school. As I honed my skills in this clandestine 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 substances were, contrasting sharply with my own internal conflict.

Occasionally, I would stroll through the various rooms of our house, projecting an air of nonchalance, as if I were simply there to enjoy the fresh

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air or engage in mundane activities. I ensured that my demeanor was relaxed and carefree so they wouldn't think I was overly eager in my quest for the good stuff. 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 drugs and substances, 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, like a guy who just stepped off a roller coaster and realized he forgot to take his heart medication. 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 that encounter like a connoisseur indulging in a lavish five-star dining experience, relishing the rich complexity of the aroma wafting through the air. Instead of swirling Merlot, I was just 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

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enough to cut with a knife. It created a vibrant tapestry of human connection, where each interaction felt like I was part of some underground cult that had just discovered Netflix.

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 pulsated 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 I just hoped I wouldn't forget my own name by the end of the night.

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 habit 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 remnants my father would leave behind, forgotten roaches, those small tokens of joy smoked down to the very end. They were often hidden

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beneath couch cushions or tucked away in the pockets of old jackets; tiny treasures left in the wake of their indulgence. I found myself collecting these 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 a tapestry of 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 of their high life, feeling the waves of euphoria washing over me, even if I didn't fully understand what was happening.

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 MJ 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, almost like a secret dance to which only he was privy.

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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 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 as well. 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. Reflecting on my childhood, particularly during my adolescent years, I

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realize I was no different. 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 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 Grease, 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?

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This 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. At just 12 years old, I found myself in a haze, baked by the fumes of my hippie parents' indulgences, which created a surreal backdrop to my youthful exuberance. There I was, belting out "Sandy, 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 a preteen caught in the throes of a smoky stupor, passionately singing a love song that probably flew over my head at the time. But honestly, that was probably the best version of myself I could muster during those bewildering years, where confusion and clarity often danced a delicate waltz.

If I were to take a stroll down memory lane and list my crushes in chronological order, it would go something like this: Lisa in 4th grade, Quillyn in 5th grade, Caroline in 6th grade, and finally, Dawn, who captivated me from 7th grade all the way through 12th grade and even somehow, unexpectedly, into college. Those were the biggies. There were many, 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 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, 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

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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 grows freely and abundantly 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'll leave this world. Will I get 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. 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. But looking back, it's clear my parents were friends with the enemy. My mother and the cop's wife, Joanne, became tight. Joanne was a seamstress who could whip up anything you could imagine, and she was pretty amazing, really, like a superhero with a sewing machine.

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Barry, 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, Joanne, 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 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 Barry 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, Joanne 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 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 of hair peeking out from under her bikini, glinting in the sunlight. I was that close.

But as I sat there, trying to soak in the tranquility around me, I was hit with a wave of horniness that felt like a sitcom gone wrong. I mean, seriously, I could practically hear the crickets chirping in the background, and at that moment, I knew I had to get out of there! So, 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.

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

But let’s be real, there was no way I could have pulled that off without a catastrophic failure. 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. 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 that clown, but I ran into Barry once when I popped back into town. I decided to hit up a bar we used to frequent, and I plopped down at the counter. 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 the beer. So, I’m nursing my Rolling Rock, stoned out of my mind, as usual, when I overhear the guy say, “That doesn’t sound like Barry 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 Barry 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

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had been a distant 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 Barry would strut around with an air of authority, as if his uniform somehow elevated him above everyone else, and how Joanne would roll her eyes at his antics, a silent partner in his little kingdom of delusion, and 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 the familiar sounds of clinking glasses and muffled conversations enveloped me like a warm blanket. I took a deep breath, letting the comforting aroma of hops and barley 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 the tapestry of 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, like the hangover I get when I remember those late-night greasy burger runs. Seriously, why didn't I appreciate life more while I was busy doing absolutely nothing? Those vibrant days, packed with laughter and what I can only describe as "adventures" that mostly involved dodging responsibilities, 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 the long drives we took, often wrapped in a cloud of chili smoke or

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whatever else my dad was puffing on. 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 while I daydreamed about my latest crush, lost in a world of youthful infatuation.

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 always headed somewhere with purpose: visiting friends, running errands, or just exploring those winding roads that stretched on forever like my dad's excuses for not getting a real job. 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. Picture this: we're leaning our heads out of the back windows like ecstatic dogs, and suddenly, bam! a massive gob of goo splatters onto my face, along with an unfortunate spray. The shock would send me into a gagging fit, my stomach churning, trying to wrap my head around the grotesque horror that just went down. All I got in return was a casual "sorry" from my father, who probably thought he'd just dropped a pencil or something. Even now, as I relive that moment, I can feel the nausea creeping back.

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

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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 chaotic humor he thought would spice up our mundane journeys. Regardless of the intention, that moment remains a testament to 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. It is essential to recognize that, despite my knowledge of the plant's aroma and flavor, I was still oblivious to the consequences that my actions would have on my life and the lives of those around me.

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 confusing. 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, because nothing says "fun" like teetering around on frozen water while trying not to faceplant in front of your crush. 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 giraffe. She won a gold medal in 1976,

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and I'm pretty sure the entire town was convinced that her success was somehow our success.

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 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 in layers of sweaters and scarves, 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 tumbling, 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 the 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 upright long enough to impress my friends. It was a simpler time, one that I now cherish deeply, as I reflect on the complexities

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that would soon follow, including my struggles with addiction 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. It was really cold back then but closing it in changed everything.

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 water," 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 allure of fitting in with the older kids. Instead, I ended up with

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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, peddling his dubious wares. 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. I participated in the sport for several years during my childhood, immersing myself in local leagues and thoroughly enjoying 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, hoping 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, feeling 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.

In my mind's eye, I could vividly picture myself resembling Adam Sandler in "Happy Gilmore," flailing about in a chaotic manner and feeling utterly out of my depth. The image was comical yet painfully accurate, reflecting my overwhelming frustration as I prepared my gear for the upcoming hockey season. The equipment felt heavy and cumbersome, a burden that weighed not only on my body but also on my spirit. In a moment of exasperation, I threw a mini tantrum, lamenting that my gear was subpar and not living up

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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.

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 around the rink to go. There were woods, a big 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 scars of 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 approached me. My eyes widened in disbelief as she closed the distance between us, her graceful movements captivating 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

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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 gaping mouth. When she finally stopped right in front of me and said hello, I nearly fainted on the spot. Holy cow! I honestly can't recall if I ever mustered the courage to say hello back to her in the past, but at that moment, it felt surreal, like a dream I never wanted to wake up from.

What happened next is etched into my bad memory folder, a place where regrets and awkward moments reside, forever replaying in my mind. "Do you have a girlfriend?" she 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 replied, "No," my voice barely above a whisper.

Looking back on this moment, I realize it stands as one of my earliest and most painful regrets, a pivotal point in my teenage years. 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 and laughter that could light up a room. 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 the beauty of red hair, the way it catches the sunlight and glimmers like fire. 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 slight disappointment etched on her face amplifying my own feelings of

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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 slip right through my fingers.

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 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 to articulate? It baffles me to this day, as I replay the moment in my head, searching for answers that remain elusive. In retrospect, I realize that my parents did a poor job of preparing me for social interactions. They set inadequate examples and equipped me with few tools to navigate those awkward moments that youth often bring. 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, indeed, my first girlfriend ever, was a full-blown classic ginger. 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 Meghan, and she was not just a pretty face; she was also incredibly intelligent, possessing a sharp mind that often left me in awe.

Meghan often took it upon herself to tutor me in algebra and my business classes, patiently helping me navigate the murky waters of academia. I distinctly remember long evenings spent in my cramped dorm room, surrounded by textbooks and scattered notes as she guided me through

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complex equations and theoretical concepts. Thanks to her unwavering support, I managed to keep my head above water during that tumultuous first semester. We had a blast together, laughing and bonding over late-night study sessions that often turned into spontaneous 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 chili 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 Meghan, 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, eventually 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,

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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 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 with 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 tumultuous 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

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my way. It was a survival strategy, one that allowed me to mask my insecurities and uncertainties as I ventured into this new chapter 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 Meghan. At the time, she always claimed that she practiced the rhythm method, a term I had only heard of in passing but accepted without question. In retrospect, that 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, Meghan 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. 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 Meghan slowly became more of a distant memory, fading into the background of my mind.

The moment classes wrapped up, I found myself 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 I was gone.

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 Burns 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

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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 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 exhilarating rides on the back of their dirt bikes. We sped along winding trails as if we were the stars of some ridiculous action movie, the wind whipping through our hair. 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, unlike my sanity after witnessing that disaster unfold. 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.

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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 heavy with fatigue, and promptly fell asleep, the day's adventures still dancing in our dreams. If only our dreams had included that van instead of whatever strange things kids dream about, like being chased by giant marshmallows or flying on the backs of dragons.

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; only this one didn't require a ticket to enjoy. 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 Honda Civic 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

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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 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 and chaos to that already tumultuous 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 five 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, why celebrate just one birthday when you can combine them all into a single, joyous, cake-filled extravaganza? 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

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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 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 altered state 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 because who doesn't love a good chuckle over a punchline that's gone straight over your head? 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 inevitably uncovered. Between my secret hits on a pipe, which was a Pepsi can, and the contact highs from my parents, the clock was ticking, and with each tick, I felt the pressure mounting. I inhaled a bit too much chili, and 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

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precarious balancing act, teetering between maintaining my composure and succumbing to the overwhelming urge to escape, and then?

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 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, well, he was a buddy at least. 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 mediocre 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 just dangerously awkward. Our paths first crossed in one of those 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.

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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.

With our minds clouded and reflexes dulled, we 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 that was way too sober for my taste, 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 after his wife, Beth, started acting like she was auditioning for the role of 'Total Nightmare.' She was a housewife with a disability, and let me tell you, her attitude took a nosedive faster than my motivation to go to the gym. We haven't spoken since that visit. Sure, we had our time together, made some great memories, but like all good things in life, that chapter came to an end. All good things must pass, like a kidney stone, I suppose.

As I mentioned earlier, I was starting to feel... not so great. A sense of unease washed over me, leaving me feeling a little spinny and a lot nauseous. 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.

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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 enthusiasm and confidence I could muster. It was an impressive throw, or so I thought! 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!

But in the midst of the excitement, I must have inadvertently closed my eyes, either during or immediately after the throw, because who needs to see the fallout of their actions, right? What I didn't see, and what would haunt me, 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.

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The adults quickly sprang into action, hauling her upstairs to the kitchen sink. In a bizarre turn of events, 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 from the wound, 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 embellishment, transforming a moment of sheer panic into a cherished family legend. Because nothing brings a family together quite like a near-death experience, am I right?

Chili is a gift from the gods. I have no doubt, and there isn't a soul 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 the trouble.

Jett, the ultimate watchdog, made sure every soul walking by knew he was on the job. He barked at a leaf blowing in the wind like it was a criminal. He barked at a squirrel that dared to give him the side-eye. He even barked at the freakin' sun coming up! I always told my wife I wanted a dog that acted more like a rug, just chilling there, silent, you know? But Jett? Nah, he was anything but that. He wasn't aggressive, but come on, he was a dog, and with my sensory issues, there's only so much sudden barking I could take before I jumped out of my skin. But honestly, even with all that chaos, I wouldn't trade him for anything. He was a pain in the ass, but he was *my* pain in the ass, and he was the reason I wasn't a goddamn ghost anymore.

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He was this little dynamo, man, just a ball of energy that never shut up! He kept me on my toes, you know? For a guy who spent years trying to figure out how to get out of bed without feeling like he was wrestling a bear, that's saying something! This little dude dragged me outside, forcing me to interact with the world again. Like, "Hey, look, there are people out here!" It was a new chapter, or whatever. And I'm not going to lie; I was actually kind of pumped to see what the hell would happen next. It wasn't some magical cure or anything, but it was way better than the sad-sack existence I was living before.

Before Jett, the thought of picking up poop or dealing with a midnight potty break felt like a fresh hell. I'm talking about those moments when you look at your life and think, "This is what it's come to? I'm standing in the rain at 3 a.m., holding a plastic bag full of my dog's crap? This is my reality now?" That level of commitment? Yeah, not exactly what I signed up for. I spent years perfecting the art of doing nothing just trying to avoid causing myself any more pain! The idea of being responsible for another living thing, especially one that communicates by shitting on the lawn and barking at ghosts, was just a bridge too far. I'd rather have a deep conversation with a mime! But then, Jett happened. And suddenly, I didn't care.

Cleaning up after this little monster was a total nightmare. I picked up a piece of a tennis ball he'd chewed to bits that looked like some alien snot. Is that complaint-worthy? You bet it is. But you know what? I dealt with it. I didn't dwell on it anymore. This dog had become my best friend, my only friend, honestly. Sure, my wife and kid loved me, but they didn't look at me with that same unconditional "Hey, what are we doing today?" excitement that this little guy did. He was always there, always ready for an adventure. I could've been having the worst day ever, the kind where you want to shove your head in a vice, and he'd come over and nudge my hand with that cold, wet nose of his.

He was my constant little shadow, following me around. I didn't even realize I'd become a dog person until one day I woke up and found myself

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genuinely excited to go for a walk. Why? Just to see him sniff a fire hydrant like it was the hottest gossip spot in town. This little dude was the reason I wasn't just a sad sack of bones anymore. He pulled me out of my own head, and for that, I'd gladly clean up every single regurgitated tennis ball he could hurl my way.

Now, don't get me wrong; the little guy following me around all the time really grated on my nerves sometimes. I love him, but come on, a man needs some space, right? I walk into a room, he walks in. I sit down; he sits down. I get up for a snack, and there he is, my furry little shadow right at my heels, like he thinks I'm going to pull a Houdini and just vanish into thin air! And the way he stares at me from the kitchen while I'm cooking? That intense, unblinking gaze is something else.

It used to be a game, a childish game, I'll admit. I'd strut from room to room, just waiting for him to settle in behind me like he had nothing better to do. Then I'd get up and do it all over again! But eventually, he figured out I'd always come back. He calmed down. He became this comforting presence instead of a frantic little shadow. He knew I wasn't going anywhere. He'd just kick back on the couch and watch me from a distance, like my own personal four-legged security guard. It was a subtle change, but a significant one. I wasn't just a warm body in the room; I was his person. There was trust there, and a little bit of freedom for both of us.

This whole insane friendship taught me more about love and healing than I ever thought possible. I mean, it's wild for a guy like me to admit that, but here we are. To get to this point, I had to tear down my ego and pride like they were a couple of old IKEA shelves. My pride! That beautiful brick wall I built around myself, and this little... thing, just waltzes in and starts marking his territory all over it. I had to face the fact that love and healing come in all shapes and sizes, and I had to be open to it! I couldn't be so wrapped up in my own misery that I missed the damn light shining right in front of me. Looking back, I think I had to suffer a bit. Life had to knock me around like a piñata to get the message through my thick skull.

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For years, I was hanging on by a thread, just trying to survive. The pain and misery were unbearable; I'm not just talking about physical pain here. Depression was a monster, a suffocating blanket that wouldn't budge. I'd lie in bed, feeling like I had cement shoes on. Every day was a war, just to get my pants on, just to be a human being. But I couldn't do that to my family. I couldn't do that to my beautiful son. No way. I had to keep pushing for them. What was the alternative? Just check out? Leave them with that disaster? I couldn't do it. So, I held on.

Jett gave me a simple, undeniable reason to get my ass out of bed in the morning. He needed to go out. He needed to be fed. He needed me. That was it. He didn't care about my depression; he just knew he had to take a dump. Suddenly, the fight wasn't for me anymore. It was for him. This little guy who loved me unconditionally, in a way I hadn't felt in years. He saved my life, plain and simple. He reminded me that life is short, brutal, and love isn't a guarantee. So, when that opportunity came in the form of a barking lunatic, I had to grab it. You have to grab it. I had to accept my humanity, embrace my fate, and just... love. I don't know what I'll do without him, and that is the most terrifying yet beautiful part of it all.