

The 2020 Event

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The 2020 Event |The Sideshows|

Hunter Owens Wallace

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Any and all resemblance to Reality is purely coincidental.

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In other words, it's just words. It's not real. Get a grip.

The 2020 Event
[The Sideshows]

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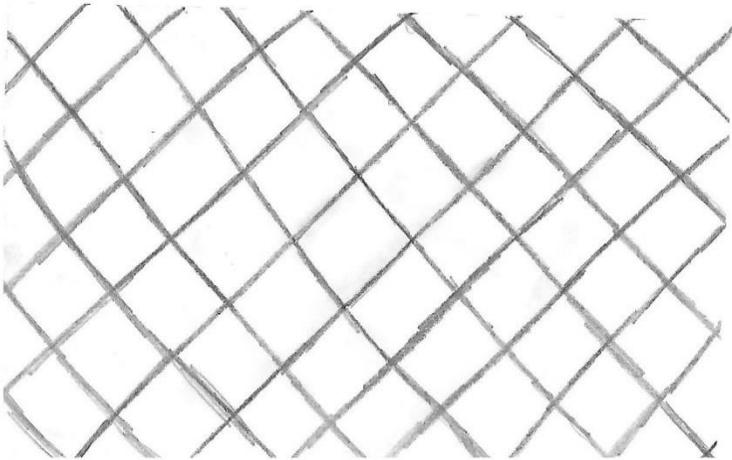
Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank my late but great cat,
Milkshake the Mongrel,
for teaching me not only how to be myself
but also to always be myself no matter what.
You're greatly missed, little buddy.
Rest in peace.

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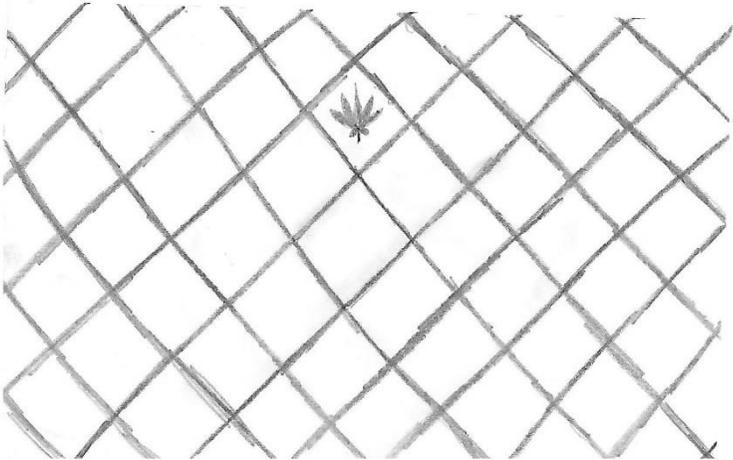
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Tales From



The Inner Rim

Universe W-420



Stoner Problems

Stoner Problems I

Turbulence

Wake And Bake

beep. Beep. BEEP!

Chet looks at his alarm clock through cracked lids and burning eyeballs. The screaming lovechild of hard plastic and microchips is shamelessly spazzing out like a toddler whose mom won't buy him a candy bar, it's way too early for this shit. Normally he would crush the crow-colored contraption into a nightstandful of broken pieces with his fist, but not today. Instead, Chet calmly presses the snooze button, and with a *click* the screeching ceases. Painless. Easy.

His eyes slowly close as he drifts back to sleep.

beep. Beep. BEEP!

click

beep. Beep. BEEP!

SLAM

Chet's had about enough. With his dastardly clock vanquished once and for all, the Chetsecutioner slowly drifts back to sleep... again. Eventually, his eyes open to a squint and he wonders why the sun is so bright at only seven o'clock in the morning. Whatever, the sun can do what it wants; Chet sits up and rubs his eyes until the guilty ecstasy of the action turns to pain and he has to stop.

Ya boy Chet doesn't have to be at work until nine today, giving him plenty of time for the daily wake and bake session. He stands and happens to notice his cell phone before he does his pipe and grinder, so he decides to check if anybody sent him any texts first.

"Ohhhhh *fuck me* it's ten'thirty."

Chet throws on his bowling shirt of a uniform and rushes out his front door, not even bothering to lock it behind him. It's not like he owns anything that a robber would want; you see, Chet lives in the house equivalent of a dive bar

bathroom these days, and this is the wealthier part of town, too.

Car keys in hand, he dives into the driver seat of his Grand PM and throws that plastic bitch in reverse, hitting the main road with a *holy fuck am I late* tempo. As he put-puts down the main road, a very startling realization hits Chet similarly to how his car hits every pothole it drives in, then out of – this is the first morning in literally four consecutive months that he didn't smoke right after waking up. The forecast for today: a bare-legged trot through a field of roses.

Chet pulls into the parking lot and parks his car – over the line between two spots, by the way – at 11:04 on the dot.

'*Only one hour late,*' Chet thinks to himself while he enjoys his last moment of Chet time before he walks through the doors. '*Or is it two? Three? Ah, who knows, late is late to these assholes.*'

Chet hatches from his car like a baby dinosaur emerging into the world, releasing a skwakish yawn and slamming the door shut with his keys inside. He won't realize he's done this until much later – damn that scrambled brain of his. That's one of the withdrawal symptoms Chet always feels first, the inability to think in a straight line, or be aware of his surroundings in general. He's aware of his inclination towards scatter-brainedness, ironically enough, he just never remembers to check himself before he inevitably wrecks himself. Oh well. The first thing Chet sees as he pushes through the doors of the 822 MiniMart is his "boss" (read: assistant manager of the store on Wednesdays and Fridays) standing behind the counter, impatiently slapping the unmopped tile floor with his foot forcefully enough for the zero present customers to hear over their incessant chattering. Chet apologizes for being late and promptly gets chewed out. The irony of being talked down to by a four-foot manchild who unironically wears spandex leggings is almost too much for Chet's increasingly animistic mind to bear.

The twentysomething, or in the words of Bron, *loser punk-ass* is very rarely late to work, it happens no more than once every couple months; the assistant to his manager just completely wasted his own youth and has zero chill left in his system, and what's more, he feels the need to take it out on his subordinates. When enough white stuff has formed in the corners of Bron's mouth for him to consider his message delivered, he retreats into his office in the back of the back of the store. Chet's left overwhelmed with feelings of gratitude and the wish to be toasted like a buttered roll right now.

The Eight'Twenty-Two

An hour or two pass – or maybe twenty minutes, it’s hard to tell – and the jitters are jittering strong. Chet’s hands won’t stop their trembling, it legitimately feels like the spirit of Parkinson’s disease gripped Chet’s nervous system by the ass as it passed him by on the bus. He checks his watch and sees that it’s just about two-ish, and like clockwork, in stumble the usual customers.

First is Smitty, a morbidly... uh, *healthy* warehouse worker who builds himself the same meal every day whilst acting, the entire time, like he has *noooo* idea what he’s about to inhale: a meatball sub with bacon, a bag of extra-grease flavored potato chips that he will pour onto the first meatball sub, a *second* meatball sub, this one with extra sauce *and* extra bacon, and a diet Bepis soda. Next come two -agers in the back half of their teens, or as Chet calls them, *TLEs* (tomorrow’s least educated), who sneak out of school early every day to buy the 822’s shitty garbage food because they don’t want to eat their high school’s shitty garbage food, and they’re followed by a couple of cool stoner dudes that Chet knows. He considers them friends, but they consider him the random dude at the 822 who would give them free food in exchange for bags of bottom-of-the-jar shake.

Until they got caught anyway, which *was* pretty lame, but it also came with a silver lining: the stoner bois got to see Chet get publicly berated by Bron while they munched on some popcorn they didn’t have to pay for.

A bucket’s worth of customers come in after the rush, but they didn’t leave much of an impression on Chet, so they may as well have never come in. Lunch passes without a hitch and the number of customers in the store dies back down to an overwhelming zero, just in time for Chet to get the sweats! These are no normal sweats though; these are the *Chetsweats*, the unrelenting cold sweats that don’t stop until the armpits of Chet’s uniform, which nobody let him know was inside-out this entire time, are an entirely different color than they were when he walked in. He checks his watch – only *hours* until his shift is over and he can go home and quell his symptoms.

With the *Chetsweats* comes a rush of irritability, mostly because of the feeling of fridity in his pits makes our buddyboy hate his life just a little bit more. Just a teensy bit, like, the size of a droplet of sweat after it’s assumed its final form in your armpit and it flows down your side like a raindrop on a waxed windshield. Chet wishes he wasn’t such an idiot, that he would’ve just smoked this morning. He totally could have, too, rushing here was pointless; coming in at 9:01 would have ordered Chet the same verbal slaughtering that was delivered for coming in *hours* late. The daily mental processes of the asinine humans he’s forced to work under must be a carnival sideshow. He feels bad for them, really. They should just smoke some pot. It would probably fix a lot of their problems.

In an attempt to not think about weed more than he already is, Chet

reminisces about the last time he ventured into the ‘22 without taking his wake and bake. He politely told a customer to, and I quote, “Fuck off and play in traffic, harlot,” and the guy totally deserved it, too; nobody gets to steal a box of honey buns unless Chet gets some free bud out of it. Shortly after Chet’s *inappropriate outburst*, Bron let the thief get away with the buns. The bastard then went on to write a bad review for the store on *Holler!* Despicable; Mundon is as Mundon does, at the end of the day. Chet normally doesn’t give a shit about little petty stuff like that, he’s usually a pretty chill guy. But when he doesn’t take his holistic medicine, well... connect the dots.

Suddenly, a pain reminiscent of getting hit with a baseball bat swings into Chet’s cranium – the headache has officially arrived. His vision even goes blurry for a few seconds, so he does the only reasonable thing he can think to do in this situation – he curls up in a little ball on the floor and closes his eyes. With the departure of one sensory input, another one arrives in the form of a high-pitched ringing in both of his ears.

It’s times like these where his cravings for the holy plant are the strongest. Chet doesn’t *want* to get high at this point, it’s far beyond that; he *needs* relief. His body is literally attacking him from the inside and he simply *cannot* deal with it, not here at work.

After a few minutes the headache subsides and his hands stop trembling, but the tropical rain forests that are his armpits are still precipitating, and he can’t concentrate on anything besides his own yearning for hot, thick, yellow-white smoke filling his lungs, taking him airborne...

“Um... hello? Is anyone here?”

Attention passengers, brace for turbulence! Chet peers over the counter and sees a young lass who could accurately be described as a beautiful blonde bombshell by anybody other than Chet, and she’s looking around for a cashier. In a flurry of panic and spasmodic jives, Chet ducks back down and *discretely* crawlwalks into the employee’s lounge, the swinging doors hitting him on the ass on the way in. He checks his appearance in the mirror and is relieved that he doesn’t look like a total wreck and/or nutcase, which is a good sign. Maybe today isn’t so bad after all. He lets a bang drop over his left eye because *reasons* and walks back out to the counter, ready to face his next challenge.

“Hello, welcome to the eight’twenty-two! How can I help you, miss?”

“Hi, can I get a pack of Marlburrow Reds? I need my herbal fix.”

Chet, about to fulminate over the sheer misuse of those words, calmly turns and grabs a pack of cancer sticks. He tries to make conversation a few times whilst he rings the Sheila, up but stutters because his mind is more scrambled than the alleged egg product that Charlie’s placing between two halves of bagel in the back.

suicide! Feelings of anxiety and nausea rush through his intestines, as does the need to *fucking smoke some fucking reefer already*. Somehow our THC-less tetrahedron survives until half-six and Geoff, his most uppity of co-workers, strolls in, his pristinely shined shoes clicking against the still unmopped tile floor. Chet, attempting to sound as diplomatic as possible while at the same time coming off as a neurotic lunatic, asks Geoff where the fuck he's been all day.

“Well you see, Mister Skylark, Bron gave me a ringy earlier on in the day and requested that I not come in until seven o'clock. I'm actually early, thank you very little.”

'Oh for FUCK'S SAKE!!!!!!!!' is what Chet thinks, but he says, “Oh okay, no worries man. Have a good night,” as he turns to finally get out from behind the front counter. While he's flipping the false countertop up, he sees Bron leaning against the back wall of the deli, hands folded tight under his armpits, thumbs twiddling his nipples through his shirt, face exhibiting a very ape-like grin of satisfaction. This is me saying this, not Chet: *fuck that guy*. Geoff tells Chet how awful he looks and offers to take over now if he wants to go home, to which Chet responds with a mental *'Fucking duh,'* and a verbal, “Thank you very much!” Our internally conflicted stoner has just enough time to get outside to his car and try the still locked handle of the driver's side door one single time before a husky Bron gallops up behind him.

In a voice with more nasal influence than a nerd with a sinus infection and one functioning nostril, Bron unleashes his finishing move. “That'll teach you to be late again, *kid,*” extra emphasis on the *kid*. “Now get on outta' here.”

Chet tries to explain to Bron that he can't quite *get on outta' here* because he accidentally locked his keys in his car in his mad rush to get to work this morning, but Bron ignores his words and walks back inside.

Chet's had a very long day. His body, which is used to an hourly intake of a very specific plant-based, medicinal, naturally occurring chemical, has been waging war against itself in an attempt to make Chet come to his senses and smoke right this second already. His boss was a douche, the customers were *customers*, and now he has to ask *His Prissyness* for a ride home.

No.

No no no no NNOOOO!

Chet's symptoms all come at him at once, the splitting headache, the sweat that puts the *rain* in rain forest, the dizziness, the mental fog that you could cut a donut out of, everything. If life was bad all day, he just entered an internal dimension of hell that he never knew existed – he can't fucking deal. He snaps, *snaps* I say! Snaps like a jazzy finger-thumb combo! Rapidly turning his head back and forth to assess his surroundings, he finds a perfect tool for the job – a large hunk of pavement. Chet dives for his asphalt salvation, picking it up and

using it as a chair in the wrestling cage match of the century – impatience versus unfortunate coincidence.

In the plot twist of the millennium, the two decide to team up. Chet smashes his car window.

Holy Smokes

The drive home is a cold one; the sharp evening air (occasionally carrying with it small splinters of window glass) blows into Chet’s face and eyes *and ears* the entire drive. He gets home to find his driveway stark empty, devoid of the landlord’s spiffy sportscar that sometimes comes to check in on him (read: request an early rent payment). Chet considers this lack of upcoming human contact to be the first good thing that’s happened to him all day.

Chet gets out of his car and pulls out his cell phone to order a pizza for delivery before he walks inside. He meant to call as he was leaving work but, you know, unbridled rage and all that. Once his dinner (a buffchick pizza) is on the way, Chet runs inside and takes himself a hot shower, oddly enough without smoking first. This is the extent of his mental cloudiness.

He gets out just in time not dry himself off before the pizza guy knocks on the door. Dressed only in a towel, and a short one at that, Chet struthops downstairs and opens his front door to find a very surprised delivery boy. The kid’s either in his mid-thirties or he’s seventeen, it’s strangely hard to tell, and he comments on Chet’s house smelling like a few skunks got loose and had an orgy. Chet replies that he has no idea what the kid’s talking about, and when the kid puts his hand out for a tip, Chet smirks and hits him with the following before shutting the door in his face.

“Here’s a tip, chiefy ol’ boss: get a job that’ll pay you full wages. And hold your nose next time.”

The couch poofs dust as Chet sits down.

Inhaling half the pizza without stopping to breathe makes the headache go away, but Chet’s tremblsweating will stop for no ‘za. He turns on the television to Dimelodeon and lays back for a few moments, allowing his stomach to process whatever it is that goes into buffalo sauce, before his eyes damn near pop out of his skull. ‘*Chet can smoke now!!*’ Chet thinks to himself.

With this realization observed, Chet’s up in his room so fast that he leaves skid marks at the bottom of the stairs.

With his door locked and a mellow lo-fi instrumental playing in the background, it is *finally* time. Chet pulls his pride and joy out from within his closet – the stash. His cache of supplies includes a bulbous ziplock baggie of

herbage, seven pipes, a pack or two of rolling papers, *and*, a left-handed cigarette rolling contraption. The baggy contains no less than three ounces of pure, green bud, the words *Big Daddy Dank* chicken-scratched on the plastic. Last time Chet picked up, his dealer told him that he got a really rare, exclusive strain, and therefore, he had to charge a premium, but Chet didn't really give a shit. At the end of the day, he just wants to burn cabbage, and he'll pay any price... *any* price.

As he opens the bag, a very specific aroma wafts into the room, but Chet doesn't even notice. After smoking for so many years, his olfactory bulb has become totally immune to the skunky scent unless he literally sticks a nug up his nose. Why would he do that, though? Waste of nug.

Chet takes a moment to contemplate whether he should roll a joint or smoke with his bong, but then he comes to his senses and grabs whichever piece is closest to him.

He packs his bud into Aphroditty, named after the goddess of beauty or *something like that*, ' all the way up to her brim. This is definitely more dank than big daddy needs to be smoking right now, Chet knows this, but Chet also gives an unprecedentedly minuscule fuck about how much he smokes tonight, so yeah. *'Fill yer pockets, boi.'* The symptoms of withdrawal miraculously drip out of Chet like saliva from the mouth of Pavlov's dog as soon as he finds his lighter; he takes a moment to enjoy the zen in the air before igniting the fire.

With a flick of his Qic and a crackle of burning plant matter, Chet finally gets what he's been seeking all day: the holy smokes.

A ghastly plume enters his body and travels down his esophagus, most of it going into his lungs whilst the remainder sneaks into his stomach so he can belch it back up and enjoy it later. The outside world and all of its preconceptions melt away in a matter of seconds, leaving Chet to be alone with his thoughts in the inner sanctum of his mind.

spark

crackle

spark spark

crackle

cough. Cough. COUGH!

What was once green is now a blackish-grayish mound of ashes. He presses the butt of his lighter into the open urn and compacts the ash, fiending himself one more hit, this one tasting dramatically less herby than the previous ones. In fact, this hit tastes like somebody bit the end off a cigar, burned it crispy, and pressed it against the back of Chet's tongue, but Chet ignores it. He lays back and feels as if he was floating while at the same time sinking into the bed.

Chet is one with his blankets, a conduit for the warmth.

Love is everywhere, everything is bliss, and Chet is absolutely *digging* it, the

winds of inner peace lift his being up from the dirty bowels of the 822, up from the rude pizza kid, up into his room and into the lovely realm of Psychedelia, up and up through the sky and past the clouds and the air's getting thin and up and up and up into spac...

Fin

The Void

I am alone in The Void.

Then, *he* appears.

I'm unsure of what to say. He's sure to say nothing.

Finally, I break.

Look, I appreciate your contribution. I really do. The pamphlet is now a tiny bit fatter. And weirder. And I appreciate it. And you. But I wasn't being serious, I don't really know how to—

“I don't care that you don't know how, I care that you put me in. I even made it seem like your *moksha medicines* or whatever you call your drugs unlocked the Spiraling ability. I did all that for *you*, so now you owe *me*. Asshole.”

I... all right, fine. I think I know how to fit you in... random question though, totally unrelated: Do you happen to own a monkey suit?

“*Do I happen to*—... no, I don't *fucking* own a *monkey suit*. I don't even have the money to buy one.”

Well shit, bud, I guess you better go rob your ass a bank or something! Those cloaks don't exactly scream *Tiny Tim*, ya feel me?

Stoner Problems 2

Insomnia

Second Day In A Row

As if by clockwork, Chet's eyes burst open the moment his cracked alarm clock strikes 11:11. He groans the groan of a grizzly that was woken from hibernation precisely three months early and rolls over to swat the cackling arthropod from the sanctity of his nightstand before pouring himself out of bed and crawling around on the floor. This isn't part of any workout routine or weird meditation thing, but it is a ritual of sorts; with only enough energy to keep one of his eyes half of the way open, Chet sniffs the air and locks on to his target. He digs through one of the numerous molehills of clothing jutting from his bedroom floor like mountains of arbitration and finds his beautiful Aphroditty, her bowl full of ash from the previous night.

Beside the slightly ashy pile of clothing is his lighter, a plain black Qic that Chet lifted from the 822 Minimart under which he is *so thankfully* employed. Multiple attempts at flicking the yanked Qic do not pan out for young Chet, unfortunately – it seems his lighter is low on fluid. Such stress so early in the morning; not only does Chet need to find his little plastic garbage can beneath the heaps of clothing scattered about his bedroom floor to throw his lighter into, but he also needs to dig out his box of matches from his old camping backpack that he hasn't used since before he moved out here so he can smoke. The catch: said backpack could literally be locked inside the Ark of the Covenant for all Chet knows. He will find the lighter regardless, he *has* to. One day without a wake and bake session is bad enough, but *two days*? Hell no.

'This isn't that big of a deal,' Chet mentally reassures himself whilst flinging dirty laundry into the air behind him, *'You can just pinch another lighter from work on your break.'*

Looks like the 822 job isn't the worst gig in the world after all. A full fifteen minutes later, Chet comes across his vanquished but still breathing alarm clock.

He is then checked right in the face by a hulking reality strapped with a hockey mask: he's going to be hours late to the job, yet again. Second day in a row. *Fanfreakingtastic*. This means that uppity-ass Mister Bron-ass will be spelunking even further up Chet's ass today than he normally does. Say goodbye to that break and hello to a docked paycheck.

No break is whatever, Chet usually doesn't take one anyway, but the docked slip of money paper will lead to a smaller weed fund for the month; this is a code red, if ever there was one. Giving the pipe incarnation of the goddess of beauty a kiss goodbye, Chet sloppily dresses himself in his unwashed deli uniform and sprints downstairs, then out into the cold night air.

Scrambled

Being sober and therefore entirely out of his element, Chet dives into his car and backs the Grand PM out of his driveway. The duo makes it halfway down the road before noticing the lack of late-morning sunshine; Chet slams on the breaks and the PM stops dead in the street, the skid marks left behind the tires as dark as the circles underneath Chet's eyes. This is the very worst-case scenario, the one withdrawal symptom that makes yesterday's nonsense look like a stroll to your mom's house. See, the other problems go away when the medicine is administered, but this one? When certain tectonic plates are set into motion beneath the Earth's surface, there's no stopping the ensuing tidal wave. Having felt more than well rested from the two-hour cat nap Chet allowed it to indulge in, Chet's body is now more animated than your parents when you walk in on them for a surprise visit, emphasis on the *surprise*. His mind is deader than the deadbolt they forgot to lock, his body's as exhausted as your parents are with the fact that you exist, and his mind is as disgusted as you should be at this dreadfully extended metaphor. Tonight, the luxury of sleep no longer exists to Chet, similarly to your innocence after you walk in on your parents nailing each other when you pay them a spontaneous visit home from... *wherever you live*.

Yeah, I said it. I made it real, and now you have to deal with it, just like Chet when he screams out, "FUCKING INSOMNIA!"

Chet throws the Grand PM back into reverse and returns to his driveway, the cold night air licking his face through the broken window. Dragging his feet up his steps and slamming the front door shut to show the Universe just how angsty he is at all of this, Chet retreats to his cave with his proverbial tail between his legs. C'mon Chet, you're not *that* scrambled, just a little tired is all. Look at the positives, my boy! Not only is there ample time to find your matches and smoke ya bad self up, but your brain's going to be so wired by the time your shift starts

that you'll probably get to work early!

What's that? Oh, you can't hear me because you're too busy screaming at yourself internally? Cool man, I'll just let you do you.

Chet gets the night off to a great start when, as he's turning to walk up his stairs, half of his body collides with the wall. Studies show that during bouts of insomnia, the given sufferer is so motor-impaired that they may as well be intoxicated; Chet is out to prove the legitimacy of this study.

Just after recovering from tripping up the second-to-last stair, Chet walks into his guest bedroom. He strips out of his uniform and climbs between the covers, melting into the comfy bed like cheese between two sheets of lasagna. Here he simmers for about forty-two seconds before he realizes that he's in the wrong room and starts screaming internally again, cursing belligerently at the malevolent force who rearranged the layout of his rental house. He leaves the guest room a mess so said malevolent force can clean it up for him later.

Clouded by irritation, the chetsweats, a headache, and a slight tremble in his hands, Chet stumbles into what *should*, by all rights, be his bedroom, and trips over a very sturdy pile of clothing. He remains here for a good short while, too angry to get up and too tired to lighten up. It's a good thing his carpet's so saturated with weed smell, or else Chet would be pushing furious.

Chet's Smokin' Tonight

Eventually Chet comes to the realization that lying on the floor of his bedroom isn't going to get him any closer to being stoned. He rises and decides to search through the tidier rooms of his abode before tackling ground zero. The backpack is almost certainly buried in this room, and he knows this, but procrastination is a thing, after all. A quick sweep of the bathroom reveals nothing with a side dish of startling uncleanliness, so he moves on to the guest bedroom.

"Who the fuck was sleeping in h— oh... wait. Shit."

Jotting cleaning the guest room just above searching the bedroom on tonight's imaginary to-do list, Chet goes downstairs and begins an expedition through his entire household. Starting with the living room where he never smokes his weed, he then proceeds through the kitchen, then the den, then the hall closet, and finally ends in the basement where he never dwells. Chet grows tired of his own wild goose chase and returns to his bedroom, the little home inside his house.

The home that he still hasn't cleaned, which he must do in order to search through it.

Chet trips over the sturdy pile of laundry again and kisses the floor, kind of

like Jimi Hendrix but the exact polar opposite. Chet decides to clean that specific pile up last, solely out of spite. You know you're exhausted when you start spiting inanimate objects, amirite? And you know you're *really* far gone when you hear an assholeish voice in your head narrating everything you do, like, what the fuck, right? *Right Chet? What the fuck, RiGhT?'*

With hopes of kicking out these intrusive thoughts, Chet selects a pile of clothing that has yet to hurt his feelings and gets to work. After, that is, he performs the smell test to determine whether or not they actually need to be washed.

sniff

When he's done gagging, Chet picks the remaining pile up and holds it while he searches for his hamper. It's stuffed inside his closet, right under the shelf where he keeps his stash box, but it takes him a while to remember this. Meanwhile, the caustic toxins present in Chet's laundry pile begin eating through the first layer of skin on both his hands and his arms, which is fine because it's just dead skin cells anyway. Chet doesn't feel a thing, and if anything, once the biohazard is properly contained, his arms seem to work a bit better! As Chet flings pile after pile of dirty laundry into the hamper, he contemplates when the last time he did laundry was. When... when *did* he do laundry last? I— er, he's... *we're* asking *you*, hypothetical reader, because if *he* doesn't know, then *I* sure as hell don't.

Oh well, doesn't matter. Chet's phone is going off.

Two more piles get loaded into the hamper before Chet needs to peel back a curtain and crack a window. The smell of evolved body odor, once a concentrated colony has been established, is far too much for young Chet to bare. Not even a bear would come near this nonsense, and they eat *human shit*. Like, *baby* human shit, like, if you load a dumpster up with full diapers, close it, wait five seconds and open it up again, there'll be bear in there just tearing the shit up — *literally* — and it'll be pissed at *you* for disturbing its feast!

Ah, there goes that phone again. Chet's ringtone is an old reggae song played at four-and-a-fifth times its normal speed; when he's high, this tune is a randomly delivered batch of pure musical ecstasy. Right now, Chet is not high, though, and the obnoxious shrill might as well be his mother's nails on the chalkboard she keeps in the kitchen. Kept. Probably still keeps. Whatever. With a mean flick of his wrist, Chet pulls all the blankets off his bed, which is the last known location of his cell phone.

There's no easy way to say this: Chet's phone crashes right into his forehead. This, tonight's umpteenth collision, does nothing to make our camper any happier, and he kicks over his almost full toxic waste depository in retaliation. That's a *yeesh* Chet, that's a big ol' *yeesh*. After composing himself and re-

containing his disaster, Chet finally check his phone. It's his stoner pal Jimmy, texting him at three o'clock in the morning to say the following:

yo were smoking l8r rite

Chet, whilst wondering why the *WHY* this needs to be asked at three o'clock in the morning, answers back...

Yeah, I have work but afterwards I'm down

cool. wat time

9 to 5

k

Chet puts his phone down and moves the hamper out into the hallway. He once had aspirations of playing competitive basketball in high school that he never followed through on, so he makes a little game for himself: for every shot he sinks into the hamper, he'll take a hit from his pipe. You know, when he finds something to combust the plant matter held within its luscious bowl.

Fourteen missed shots later leave Chet's hallway more littered than a minefielded rice paddy, and Chet is grumpier than the farmer who discovered said minefield with his now prosthetic foot and leg. Oh well, it's not like Chet's *not* going to smoke because of this.

Cue the speedy reggae.

steves comin to

Chet studies the strange symbols on his phone screen, attempting to decipher their meaning. '*Oh, Steve is coming to smoke,*' he thinks to himself while he makes a one-man show of rolling his eyes in a very *no shit* kind of way.

K

dont k me toolbag. c yu 2mro

Chet throws his phone into the hallway. To his surprise, it lands in the laundry basket! Whoop whooooooop, Chet's smokin' tonight! Er, *this morning!* Chet's smokin' this morning! Or, actually, would it be later...? Whatever. Chet's getting high *soon*. Besides, time isn't even *real*.

It Is Time

By the time Chet's finished clearing all but one of the piles off his bedroom floor, the sun is beginning to peek over the horizon. In a flash decision of egocentricity and continued spite, Chet moves to clean out his calamity of a closet before touching the stupid pile of stupid clothing on his stupid fucking floor.

You know, the one that outsmarted him twice in the same night.

The inanimate laundry pile. Yeah, that one

Inside his closet, Chet finds no less than two CO₂ airsoft guns – a pistol and

a rifle – that he’s totally going to get fixed one day; fourteen little cardboard boxes that have the words *HotBox* stamped on top of them with a branding iron, all stuffed with various pieces of smoking equipment and accessories; mounds of infected dirty clothing; mounds of clean clothing that caught the dirty contagion simply from sharing a proximity with the nasty clothes; a cylindrical box containing a burnt-out lava lamp; two oversized stuffed animals, one a bear and one a bigfoot, that a now-straightedge ex-girlfriend gave back to him after he originally won them at a carnival for her; eighty-seven old *vidyaGame* magazines that Chet never skimmed, read, nor looked at; a few old movie posters rolled so tightly that they’ll never unroll without curling, and; a box of pizza that was left in there so long ago that the microorganisms in the cheese have evolved to the size of beetles and developed their own ecosystem.

Yet no backpack, no matches, no spare lighter. Imagine that.

All right, time to swallow that pride. Chet stands across the room from his archenemy, *The Gatekeeper*. The final battle is about to begin. Orchestral boss music plays in Chet’s head before it’s cut off by the theme of that old western flick *The Bad, The Good and the Guapo*. A tumbleweed composed of lint, dust bunnies, and weed tumbles by in the background. Then... Chet anticlimactically begins throwing the last of the dirty clothes onto the piles that have formed around his hamper. As the pile diminishes, Chet becomes very angry with himself when he should just be happy; the pile was so sturdy this whole time, so easily able to outsmart him, because it was built upon his camping backpack.

The one with the matches in it that he’s been searching for all night. It was right there in front of him the entire time. *Imagine tha–*

“Shut the fuck up with your *imagine that* shit! Fucking hell!”

Matchbox in hand, Chet hasn’t been this excited since he was a newborn who’d just seen the light. He lights an incense, closes the opened curtain, dims the lights, hits that lo-fi. *It’s showtime.*

Holding a freshly packed Aphroditty and the matchbox in one hand and a single match in the other, Chet overzealously strikes the green-tipped twiggyboi. So overzealously, in fact, that the match breaks in half as it combusts. In a blaze of glory like no other, the ball of phosphoric flame flies unguided through the air towards Chet’s nightstand. By the time our boy launches himself at the small fire and extinguishes it, a *small but not as small as the fire* scorch is burned into his carpet. *Fuck.*

After making a pit stop in the bathroom to run water over the incredibly minor burn on his hand, Chet slinks back into his room, his tail tucked so far between his legs at this point that he realizes, *That’s not a tail, that’s just my dick! Man am I tired.*

Chet gets down on his hands and knees to pick the tiny sliver of charcoal

from the melted strands of carpet fibre, and that's when he sees it. There, underneath his nightstand, lays an old lighter, one that he paid for long ago. He never even got to take the safety off, it's so pristine, so innocent. So pure. Reaching through cobwebs and entire bedscrapers full of dust bunnies, Chet salvages the lighter and lays it next to Aphroditty; truly a match made in heaven. Then, he turns and whips the box of matches into the wall next to his doorjamb, spilling all of its contents on the once clean carpet beneath his light switch. New room's gotta start somewhere, right?

Finally, *it is time*. Chet sits on his floor and leans back against his bed. He lights his bowl right in the center of the leafy green soup and draws, filling them lungs with the best oxygen substitute known to man. He holds his hit in until his eyes water, then slowly exhales the cloud into his room so he can breathe it in again later. Six more hits and the bowl's made as ashy as the air is hazy. Finally, after a night of more trials and tribulations than Heracles himself had to face, Chet is one happy camper.

That is, until the alarm on his phone goes off, informing him that it is now 8:52 AM, and that he's going to be late for Bronology 101.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me."

Fin

Chad

“What do you mean you *saw* him?”

“I saw him mom, I saw Tyler! I mean, the guy’s name was Chad or something, but he looked and sounded exactly like him!”

Momma Portman shoots her daughter a look. “What were you doing at a minimart, anyway? You don’t eat that shit foot. If you’re smoking cigarettes, young lady, I swear to God...”

“Ugh!” Isabelle *ughs*, “I was just *thirsty* and I needed to grab a *drink*, mom! Are you not hearing me?! I saw *Tyler*, he’s still in town! He’s not dead!”

Mom grabs Isabelle by the shoulders, brings their faces close. “Listen to me, *very, carefully*. Your brother is *gone*, he’s an *asshole* and he abandoned our family. He’s dead to me, and he should be dead to you, too, Isabelle. This...” She softly pushes her daughter away and begins to massage her pounding temples. “This is the third time you’ve claimed to see him in the past year. Get a grip, child! He’s gon—”

“No, he’s *not!*” Isabelle shouts, pushing herself further away. “He’s my brother and I love him, and you should too! He ran away for a reas—”

“HEY! If you keep this shit up, then I’m calling your father at work. You know he doesn’t like to be disturbed.”

Isabelle backs away towards the front door. “He was never like that before Tyler left. All of this shit started the day you walked down into that basement and found it empty!”

Isabelle storms out of the house, not letting the locked door stop her, and climbs into her car. Lighting a cancer stick and hanging it out the window, Isabelle speeds off into the day, unsure if she’ll ever be coming back.

Stoner Problems 3

F(r)iends

Bronology

Ripping down the street going thirty-seven in a twenty-five, Chet Skylark's state of mind is the same color as his eyes: bloodshot red. An excruciatingly sleepless night spent neurotically and maniacally searching through his house for a reason to not clean his room just recently ended in a much-needed bowl of weed. His clothes reek, his hair is so greasy that it's sticking to the back of his neck, and he keeps going cross-eyed for some reason, but Chet's not about to let that crap stop him. Hours late to work is not a look he needs to repeat two days in a row, especially with the Bronager's ultrachic taste in scheduling.

As Chet turns on to the last stretch of driving between him and the job that affords the gas he feeds his car, the 822 MiniMart begins to shine in the distance like a golden palace among the clouds. The Grand PM's clock reads a solid 8:55 – today just might be Chet's lucky day. Then, a shrill sped up reggae bonanza reminds dude that it is never, *ever*, Chet's day.

“Hello?”

“Yooo, Chit!” says a raspy voice, the speaker of which hasn't woken up yet. “What's goooood kid?”

“Uh, it's Chet, and not much. About to get to work. ‘Sup Jim?”

“I know ya name, Chot. Yo, we're smoking later today, right?”

Chet slows to a stop at the most inconvenient traffic light that was ever installed within the fifteen feet between the exit and the entrance of the 822's parking lot.

“Yeah, you texted me before. I'm working until fiveish, but we can chill after.”

“What?” Jimmy says, sounding insulted. “I didn't fuckin' tex– oh wait, hahahahah yeah I did. I just woke up, word. Catch ya later, Chatter Cheese.”

“Dude, it's Che–” *click*

The phone flies over *Chetter Cheese's* shoulder and lands in the groove between two of the back seats. Oh that Jimmy, that Jimster, that Jim-jam-a-fuckin'-reeno. *What a guy.* As soon as the delayed light turns green, Chet slams on the gas and banks the turn on two wheels before drifting into one of the many open spots in the parking lot of the 822, sliding in just one spot over from the only car in the entire town of Mundon with tinted windows. After very attentively taking the keys from the ignition and pocketing them, Chet hustles inside the minimart with the bustle of a bus full of TLEs.

He did it! The car's clock said 8:58 when he got out! Our boy is at work on time! He might be high, but let's be real, if he wasn't, he probably wouldn't be here at all right now! All that matters is that Chet's here, he's *present*, and he's in a good mood, ready to face the day and all of its consumer-based challenges.

"Skylark, you're late. It's nine'oh-one," booms the loudspeaker, alerting all zero of the customers that Chet is a minute late.

A burly red-haired woman with not nearly enough freckles on her face, arms, legs, and every other part of her body that she doesn't have covered up by clothing, walks out of the doors leading into the back. She stands before Chet with folded arms, towering over his otter-like build, and looks him up and down before taking a deep, loud inhale of the air emanating in his immediate vicinity. At first, Kath shakes her head in disappointment, but then she just chuckles to herself.

"A minute ain't that bad, all things considered. You look like hell Chet, you livin' okay?"

Chet smiles. Good ol' Kath. "Yeah, I just didn't get much sleep last night, my brain wasn't behaving. I'm sorry I'm late."

Kath motions towards the absence of a line at the register. "Well apologize to all the customers you've held up with your tardiness! You're lucky Mistress Bron isn't here today, she'd chew your ear right off for this blasphemy. Nah, just kidding kid, you're all good. Your shirt's on backwards though, fix that. Also, we have a new employee, she's in the break room. So uh, don't change your shirt in there. Or do, I don't know how confident you are. I'm goin' back to my she-cave; try not to burn the place down, okay?"

"You got it, boss."

"Good. The girl's name is Isabelle, you're going to train her in the ways of Bronology one-oh-one. Soun—"

"Did someone say my name?"

Chet and Kath both turn towards the counter and see the new employee. It's that girl that came into the store to buy cigarettes yesterday, the *admittedly attractive but not remotely Chet's type* girl. Chet's stomach turns to a lump of metamorphic rock.

“Isabelle, this is Chet. Chet, Isabelle. Now that that’s out of the way, I’m going to my cave. Call me if yuh’s need me, but uh, *don’t need me.*”

Kath turns and leaves the children to play. Chet, attempting to avoid eye (and every other level of) contact, circumnavigates the counter and slips into the break room to fix his shirt. When the cloth is draped over his eyes, he hears the door open and freezes.

“So hi!” Isabelle Portman says to the side of Chet Skylark’s shirted head. “I came in here yesterday to buy some ciggaboges and you checked me out, do you remember me?”

Chet slowly brings the shirt over his body and turns to face his first adversary. “Oh yeahhhh, hi– uh, hi there. I’m Chet. I’m also really stoned, so I don’t know how much help I’m really gonna be for you, uh, fer you today.”

“Oh, its cool!” she beams, bubbly as the Creature energy drinks cooling in the fridge. “This job is pretty basic, just don’t steal all the money. Hey, you know, it’s kind of funny, um, you look so much like my brother Tyler!”

‘Shit.’

Pack The Bowl

“Yo, so I had an idea. Let’s go camping tonight!”

“Camping? Fuck it, I’m down. I haven’t been camping since... well, it’s been a fuckin’ *while*. I’ll grab my stuff after I get out of wor–”

“Nah nah nah,” Jimmy corrects him, “you gotta pick us up right after you get out, it’ll already be five o’clock.”

“But all my camping stuff is at home, I–”

“So just run home during your break, it’s gotta be lunch time soon, doot.”

“Well... that’s not a bad idea, actually. There’s this new gir–”

“WOAH!” Jimmy shouts, coming a little too close for comfort. “Woah, Chatter Box, I didn’t ask, ‘cuz. You can tell us later though.”

A pause. Then, “A’ight man, sounds good. I’ll run home in like an hour.”

“Wort. Yo we got you on the weeds, bee-tee-dubz.”

“Dope, thanks Jim!” said with a sudden change of inflection. “I’ll hit y’all up when I get out of here.”

“Wort. Peace.” *click*

As Jimmy lowers the phone to the cup holder, Kris passes him a cherried bowl over the console. Jim takes it and draws, inhaling until the little red glow flickers out. He exhales the smoke through the pipe and scatters the ashes of his cashed bowl all over the car, which only adds to the slight haze the boys already have brewing. The bowl, and an expecting look, is passed back to Kris, who takes

said bowl and leans back in the driver's seat, dodging the look and all of the world's expectations. Jimmy holds the look as Kris closes his eyes and soaks in the hot box.

"Dude," Jimmy croaks in a raspy, burnt-out voice. "I can still see you through the smoke, pack the bowl."

"I can't though, dude," Kris slowly drawls back. "We smoked all the weed. Oh yeah, I wanted to, like, ask you and stuff, man. How are we gonna have enough for the camping trip tonight?"

"Fuck, already?" Jimmy says, tuning out the noise after hearing the word *all*. "A'ight, whatever, we needa go to Chad's house. You know his address?"

"Maybe, but..." as he pauses to contemplate why one parks in the driveway and drives on the parkway. Then, "Woah, sorry, I uh, I think I've only been in his driveway before."

"So what's the address?"

"Umm... either, uhh... um... twenty-four Kodey Drive, or... yeah, either forty-two Kodey Drive or twenty-four... no, forty-two Kodey Lane. Or... I forget man, they don't like, they don't name streets in this town too good at all."

Jimmy forcefully leans his head back and gazes up at the burn marks in the ceiling of Kris's car. "Okay, you go to Kodey Drive, I'll go to Kodey Lane. Call me if Chad shows up, but don't let him see you."

Jimmy hops out of the car and slams the door, leaving the stoney Kris with his mission. The afternoon air is cool and, as he takes a big drag of it through his nose, Jimmy can hear his lungs whistling.

A moment later, the tinted driver-side window opens and Kris leans out. "Why can't I let him see me? Aren't we, like, meeting him there? And stuff?"

"Dude," Jimmy *dudes* without turning around, "just do what I said."

Off they go.

The Qic Is Flicked

Jimmy's high starts to fade after fifteen minutes' walk between the parking lot of the 822 and what is hopefully Chet's driveway. He's hidden in the bushes, and branches keep poking him in the sides. The sun's too hot, it's making him sweaty. There are freaking bugs crawling all over poor Jimmy. He thinks to himself, *'There better be some good fuckin' weed in this house after all this shit.'*

Forty-four minutes later, a vaguely familiar Grand PM pulls into the driveway. Chet climbs out and Jimmy silently sucks in a breath, not about to get peeped after all this bullshit. He watches Chet walk into the house through the already unlocked door. The man damn near screams and blows his cover but no,

this is his chance, he can work with this. He waits for the twenty seconds it takes the *thumps* to summit the staircase, then Jimmy makes his move.

Lying in wait on the stairs leading down to the basement, Jimmy peers through the crack under the door. Seconds go by, then minutes. What the hell is taking Chot so long to get his camping shit and get out of here?!

Eventually he hears feet slapping down a flight of stairs followed by a door being shut. Jimmy emerges from the basement and a slight waft of Cannabic odor graces his nostrils. He breathes deeply, taking it all in. *'Very well,'* he thinks to himself before running up to Chet's room, gingerly stepping over the skid marks at the bottom of the stairs.

Surprisingly enough it's actually pretty clean in Chet's bedroom. Jimmy notices a pile of toothpicks or something next to the door, but other than that it's spotless in here. He's not here to judge Clint's cleanliness though; sitting on the foot of the bed in a neat little pile ripe for the pilfer is a big ol' bag of weed, more pieces than anybody would ever need (let the record reflect that there's only one glass bowl on the bed), and a bunch of papers and other stuff that Jimmy doesn't care about right now. Without any hesitation, Jimmy goes into the bag and pinches a couple nugs, breaking them up with his fingers like a caveman as he stuffs the bowl of Chet's pipe with the crumbs. At long last, party time – Jim leans back, slaps the pants of his pocket... *the pocket of his pants*, and grimaces when nothing cushions the blow.

'God dammit. Of course he forgot a lighter! Looks like it's time to call Kris, buddyguy Jimmy the Jim-Jam Jamster.

Fortunately, Jimmy only has to wait a few minutes for Kris to bring him the lighter.

He told Kris that the door was unlocked, but the moron *knocks* on it anyway. Obscenely annoyed and not nearly high enough, Jim-jamboree stomps down the stairs and throws the front door open.

"Dude, I *definitely*, like, didn't go to Chet's house. I knocked on the door and some lady answered, right? So I ask for Chad, and she starts flippin' a dip on me, like, accusin' me of being sent by her daughter to mess with her. Dude, I didn't know *what* was going on."

Dumbfounded and slack-jawed, Jimmy stares Kris in the face. "I... I didn't *ask*, Kristoff. Where's the fuckin' lighter at, dawg?"

Kris pulls the lighter from his back pocket and Jimmy snatches it before it's even presented. Jimmy sprints back upstairs with Kris following close behind and he jumps onto the bed, wildly grabbing at the bowl as it bounces back and forth, as if Chet slept on an old hippie-ass waterbed or some shit.

Then, the Qic is flicked.

An hour or two later, Chet's herb supply is half depleted. The dynamic duo

decides they're probably high enough for now before smoking one more bowl together and packing up the weed supply. Kris, still confused over where they're going to get the weed for tonight's camping trip, starts to take his last toke, but stops himself when Jimmy get up and walks out the door. Opting to not get left behind, Kris rises and ejects the red-hot charcoal cherry of their umpteenth bowl into the air above that random pile of green-tipped toothpicks next to the door. Better to have loved and lost to never have loved at all, he supposes.

Party Favors

Jimmy flicks the spent roach of one of the many joints he rolled from Chet's weed into the street. The afternoon sun is glaring down at the boys as they soak up their high on a bench near the town's sole patch of forest. It's not deep enough to get lost in, yet it's dense enough to lose yourself in; perfect for a camping trip.

"Duuuude," exhales Kris, his eyelids more than half of the way shut. "They call it a park because you park your car to get out into nature. Maannn, the, like, English language, I sweeeaaar, duuude."

Jimmy rolls his eyes, thinking, *'This fuckin' guy.'* He checks his phone. 5:17. Why is Chet not here yet? They can't really smoke any more until they get to the camping spot. Too many humans out and about, watching them, observing them, keeping an eye on the two misfits sitting on their bench, plotting the downfall of the town of Mundon. This day has been a chore and a half, and it only seems to be getting more inconvenient for our buddy Jim.

Then, the sound of a crying puppy erupts from Jimmy's pocket, nearly causing Kris to piss himself.

"Finally!" *click* "Hello?"

"Hey Jim, it's Chet. Where should I pick you guys up?"

"Nowhere lipshit, me and Kris are already at the park. Hurry up, I wanna get stoned."

"Whuh- I thought, erm... didn't you say it was gonna be me, you, and Steve?"

"NO, I fuckin' dih- oh wait, yeah ahahahah, yeah I did. Yeah he couldn't come, bummer bro. Why you always gotta bring the mood down, man?"

"HI CHET!" Kris screams from a foot away.

One dirty look from a stroller-pushing father later, Jimmy says, "Kris says hi."

"Hey Kris. A'ight, I'll be there in a few. Sorry I'm late, that g--"

"DUDE!" Jimmy spews, garnering the attention of the passersby (other than the dad of the year) that weren't paying him any attention until now. Then,

perhaps a bit more quietly, “You aren’t late, dude, you’re not even here yet. Huuuurrrryyyyyy!”

click

Jimmy turns to Kris and says, “He’ll be here soon. Try to sober up a bit, okay Kris?”

“Okie dokie.” Kris takes a few deep, intent breaths, but remains as stoned as ever. Oh well. “Dangit, I tried man. Hey, it was awful nice of Chad to let us burn at his house before, man. Like, in his bedroom and stuff.”

Jimmy shoots his compatriot a look that goes way over his head. “Yeah, dude’s great. Just don’t mention it to him, cool?”

“Okay man. Hey, can I mention that he’s super cool for letting us smoke his weed tonight? ‘Cause tha—”

“No, Kris, speak when you’re fuckin’ spoken to. I swear to god, you’re a brick wall.”

A few minutes later, Chet pulls into the parking lot. Kris springs from his seat to help his buddy unload while Jimmy sits back and enjoys the show. It’s incredible that they’ve trained circus monkeys to work like humans, really stunning.

Eventually Jimmy approaches the two dudes he’ll be smoking with tonight and holds out what used to be a big ol’ herb sack.

“Yo. Got the party favors.”

“Dank!” Chet exclaims, maybe a little too loud. “Dude I *need* it, that freaking new girl at work I was telling you about? She kept trying to convince me that I was her older brother who apparently ran away a few years ago. Fuckin’ weird, right? Like, is it just me or is that weird as shit?”

“That’s just queer, chick was probably into you. Lots of humans into incest shit now, with that fuckin’ porn on the internet and shit,” Jimmy explains before hocking a horrific loogie right next to Chet’s shoe. “Doesn’t beat our story though, a firetruck nearly tee-boned us on the way over here.”

“Yeah man,” Kris says, shaking the PTSD from his thoughts. “It was crazy irresponsible of him. Like, where’s the fire, right?”

Kris has a laugh, offering to share it with Jimmy and Chet. They silently decline.

Then, Chet picks up the slack. “Well damn, dudes. Sounds like we could all use a burn, then.”

And with that, the three wander off into the woods on a search to find a nice spot to smoke themselves silly and settle down for the night. Yes, they’re all going to settle into place, just like the charred remains of Chet’s rental house. It’s a good thing his landlord swung by to demand an early rental payment, or else the fire department never would have gotten called!

Fin

Mystic Shit

“What do you mean you can’t *discern* the cause of the fire?! I need to make an insurance claim! What am I supposed to say, that the shit got struck by fuckin’ lightning?!”

“Not if you’re Jewish!” the fireman chuckles, patting himself on the belly. “Look sir, I—”

“Tyrone, *please*. You know my name.”

Tyrone sighs. “Fine. No, *Lemmy*, we’re not totally sure what started the fire. We think it could have been a tossed cigarette butt or something of the sort, but we found *this* in what might have been his bedroom before it caved in,” as he holds his hand out. Sat in his palm is a melted glass *thing*, a paperweight but warped, disfigured, and totally unrecognizable.

Lemmy takes it and holds it close to his eye, the glass still warm from the fire’s touch. “What kind of mystic shit was this kid into?!”

Stoner Problems 4

Three High Campers

Dip'A'Dop

A Qic's flick is accompanied by the soothing, irresistible *crackle* that kicked off so many hip-hop bangers that Chet never listened to during his childhood as smoke flows through the artificial glass pipe and into the organic meat pipe leading to Jimmy's lungs. A moment of silence to appreciate the wind whistling through the trees, then, "Ahhhhh." A small, happy cloud floats towards its family in the sky.

"Can we get moving guys? It's almost dark..."

Jimmy passes the bowl to a *very happy to be here* Kris.

"... and we're nowhere near the campsite, we still have a lot of walking to do..."

Kris takes out a crushed-up water bottle and fills it with smoke, expanding the plastic with enough crinkling to drown out the chatty Chet. Then, he breathes the smoke back in. Reduce, reuse, recycle.

"... and if we don't get to going, we'll have to set up a whole n- yeah, pass it here."

Chet Skylark's had an excruciating week. After a very turbulent Wednesday at work, Chet gave into a sobriety-induced bout of insomnia and carried it all the way through work the next day while his fiendish friends, unbeknownst to Chet, robbed all the weed from his house. And burned it down. Accidentally.

Chet definitely won't be getting that deposit back.

Now, our Chet's perched on a log with those very same friends, taking another quick burn break before they continue along on their camping excursion. Mentally exhausted, physically perturbed, and high as the park's canopy on 'dro, Chet just wants his clique to stop smoking drugs for two seconds so they can get their tents set up in the daylight.

His attempts at moving the stoned statues fails, but luckily a mysterious

rustling emerging from a bush behind them does just the trick.

“The fuck was that?!” Jimmy cries as smoke gently floats up his windpipe and out into the air. Kris grabs the bowl and torches it out of fear, clearing the chamber.

“It... *could* be Tiny Tim,” Chet says over Kris’s coughing.

Jim slowly turns towards Chet, keeping a disgusted and slightly embryonic look on his face. “Tiny... *Tim*? The fuck is that, some kind of circus act?”

“Uh... kinda. I’ll tell you guys later, when we have a fire going. Can we go, though?”

Jimmy opens his mouth to say something snarky, but the chance is snatched when he gets pelted in the head by an acorn. Jumping Jim leaps up, his heart racing as fast as his eyes are scanning the forest around him, but he sees nothing. Then, he gets domed by another acorn.

“Ow, FUCK!” Jim screeches. “Yeah let’s dip’a’dop, y’all grab the cooler!” as he scurries towards the trail.

Chet and Kris share something of a look and a definite chuckle before grabbing the cooler together and shoving off. Meanwhile, two squirrels high five each other before twitching their way down the tree and over to the log to paw up any leftover Cannabis flakes.

Crack

The darkness of lady night quickly encroaches over an innocent, warm summer’s afternoon. The gang stops for a smoke break no less than three more times between their leaving of the log and their inability to see the trail they walk down. There’s a slight wind, and between it and the lighter with the glowing flint, igniting the bowl is becoming quite the hassle. Kris already burned himself twice, poor dude. Yet they keep repacking the bowl, keep burning the holy herb, until Chet finally speaks up.

“So like... I guess we’re not gonna make it to the spot tonight.”

Jimmy shoots him a look that goes totally obscured by a cloud of smoke. “I think we got a spot right here, man! I’mma crack a bottle, why don’t you two crack some wood and get crackin’ on a fire?”

Chet looks over at Kris, who’s using the lighter to study the intricacies of the lines on his hand, and shakes his head. It takes him nearly a half hour to dig out a pit with his hands, assemble rocks around it, and scrounge up enough dried leaves and twigs to bundle together and sustain a small flame. Kris went ahead and collected an armful of logs, which is about as useless as Jimmy is right now, but at least he’s up and moving.

The twigs he gathered won't last long in the fire, so Chet stumbles off into the darkness in search of firewood. Jim gets to work on packing the bowl again. The grind must never stop.

"Y—" a cough. "Yo, how much pot we have left?" Kris asks after confusing the firepit's smoke to that of a freshly lit bowlpack.

"Uhh... not much. Bag'll be empty soon. Here," Jimmy growls as he tosses the bag *over the open fire* to Kris. "You pack it from now on."

"Word. Hey man, when are we gonna thank Chad for the free weed, dude? This is so dope of him, I feel li—"

"Already did! Yeah, we covered it, it's all taken care of. Like I said before," as he leans forward so the campfire may cast spooky shadows on his face, "*don't mention it.*"

In the darkness around the campsite, the leaves begin to rustle.

Cough

"Nah," Chet says to a silent friend group. He listens intently for a few more minutes, then, "Nah, definitely not squirrels. The noise is too big, that's at *least* an obese raccoon or a woodchuck or a coyote, or suh`um like that. Maybe a beaver, although we're kind of far from water."

"The *noise* is too... *big? What?* That doesn't even make any fucking sense," Jimmy spits before helping himself to the first hit of the freshly packed bowl.

"Well, you know what I mean. It's gotta be something bigger than just a squirrel, plus, nobody's taking acorns to the head. Know what I mean? Kris, do you get me?"

"Honestly dude," Kris says, trying to get a grasp on reality, let alone Chet. "I have, like, no idea. I'm just kind of here right now guys, I don't even know if I exist for sure. Like, yaaahh."

Jimmy and Chet look at Kris, then back at each other, then back at Kris.

"So uh, so *anyway*," Jimmy says as he fishes for the lighter that tumbled out of his hand. "Too big to be squirrels, huh?"

"Yeah man. Like I said, it's probably just a big raccoon or a little deer or... hah, or Tiny Tim." Nobody laughs at this joke, and Chet feels a little awkward. "You guys wanna hear the story now?"

"Not really," Jimmy says, telling us all how he really feels, "but it's gotta be better than mister, fuckin', *I think therefore I might not be* over there."

Kris says nothing, allowing the words to whoosh over his head like a paper airplane. Yes, instead of accepting the offer for a pissing contest, he just looks at Chet with googly eyes and a winning smile.

“A’ight, so like, in my hometown, there’s this lake, right? Well, there’s a lot of lakes, but the one I’m talkin’ about is different, it’s called Skuh– uh, uh, I mean... *Monksville*. Yeah, sure, lots of monks live there now, whatever. So it used to be a town called uh... well, it doesn’t matter, the important part is that the government swooped in and bought all the land in the seventies so they could flood it and make a reservoir.

“So the town, before it was flooded, it had like, this like, this permanent circus attraction thing, and during the last few days the town stood, they got this new attraction called *Tiny Tim the Terrible*. I wasn’t alive back then, but a buddy of mine from back home, his mom lived in the area when she was a kid, and *she* saw it, the thing was literally a bigfoot. Like, mad tall, hairy, bipedal, the whole shit. Apparently, some rich guy ape-napped him off an island out in the Specific and sold him to the circus. I don’t know, the details always change a little bit.

“So uh, yeah, on the last day of the circus, Tiny Tim escaped and killed the circus workers. Ran off into the woods, never to be seen again. Legend has it that he still lives there today, back in Tre– uh, back in my hometown. That’s the story. What do you guys think?”

The guys offer Chet literally zero in way of a reaction.

Trying to save himself, “I uh, I heard it from a friend. He tells it much better.”

“Well I sure fuckin’ hope so. That sounds like some Jersey-ass shit man, where’d you say you were from again?”

“What?!” Chet asks, caught off guard. “What do you mean, I-I, I live in Mundon! I...”

“Hold on Jim, I got this one,” Kris pipes in, finally dislodged from his existential thought hole. “You see Chet, Jimmy and I are very interested in the study of cryptids, that is to say, creatures of myth and legend that may, or may not, exist. Of all the states that used to be legally bound to the United States of America before it became untied, New Jersey stands out to cryptozoologists and our larger community of critically thinking truth seekers as a hotbed of ridiculous and probably false stories. The Jersey Devil, ghost wolves that haunt a paved road, this Tiny Tim character – all ridiculous creatures with ridiculous backstories. Now, you ever see Mothman up there in the pine barrens, you let me know. A bigfoot though? Come on, man.”

“Yeah,” Jimmy contributes. “If I remember correctly, you just kind of showed up here one day Chet, totally alone. Like, you’re not a clone, you had to come from somewhere, but you never told me or Kris, *or* fuckin’ Steve for that matter, where you came from.”

“N-no, I–” Chet falls off the back of the log, but Kris approaches and helps him up. “Thank you. No, that’s just not... you guys wanna hear something *really* ridiculous? That new chick at work I was tellin’ you guys about, Isabelle? She

thinks I'm her long-lost brother or some shit. For like, *no* reason too, just because I kind of look like him. And our voices sound the same. Like, how weird is that?

"Guys? C'mon, how *Jersey* is that?!"

An uncomfortable silence. Then, from Jimmy's mouth, "Yeah, you were saying that earlier. Question for ya, Chet: did you move into town around the same time that she did?"

"Well, yeah, I think so... but—"

"And is she, too, from New Jersey?" Kris postulates.

"I never said I was from Jersey! But uh..." Thumbs are twiddled. "I don't know, maybe I did. Maybe I didn't. I don't remember... to be honest, my memory's been weird ever since I moved to this town. Like, it feels like... never mind. But anyway, I—"

Jimmy shrugs, cutting Chet off with the chipped edge on his shoulder before he hits the bowl. After cashing that bad boy, he carefully balances it upon the beer can structure, not bottle but can, that he's been building ever since he cracked open that first cold one. "Maybe she's right, man."

This simple suggestion fucks Chet up worse than the mind-melting collision of paradoxical memories. He starts spinning, the Chetsweats flow in torrents, the trembles rear their ugly head – it's just like Turbulence all over again!

"Nono, no, that's just, no, that's... you know what? Fuck it, I'm buggin', I'm like, I'm tense as hell. Here," Chet says, hand in his pocket. He takes out a small bagglet of herb and Jimmy and Steve share a look. The leaves outside the glowing orb around the campfire begin to rustle as Chet throws Kris the baggie.

"What's this, bro?" Kris asks, his voice suddenly shaky.

"My secret special stash, man. Go on, pack it and pass her over."

Kris looks at Jimmy and gets a nod, so he proceeds to pack the bowl. This weed is very crystallly, much more so than the rest of his weed. The nugs are a deep green with subtle hints of purple, and the trichomes are just... the thing looks like it was dipped in sugar. *Rainbow* sugar. Or salt, it's very hard to see colors in the low light, it could just be white. And the stickiness, *oh* the *stickiness*! Kris has never went from zero to one hundred on something so fast, this magical preemo bud invades his thoughts as he packs it down, truly dominates his mind. You know, man, thank goodness for Chet, he *really has been the hookup today*. *Weedman Chet, Pagan Deity of Mundon State Park. How lucky I am to know him...*

"Ay. AY! Yo Kris," Jimmy spouts as he claps his hands an inch from Kris's eyes, snapping him from his trance. "You've been staring at that shit for like ten minutes, puff it or pass it, son."

Embarrassed, Kris tires to give greens to Chet, but he refuses, insisting that he who packed it shall spark it. No arguments from ya boy, he burns a hole right

through the center of the mound, killing the entire stash in one monolithic hit. The look in his eyes says *holy shit* as he exhales a cloud dense enough to snuff out the fire in Chet's makeshift pit. Jimmy's peeved off as ever, but Chet's impressed, already working on breaking up the bud from his *second* bag from his secret special stash. You know, the one he didn't take out but is holding nonetheless?

Jimmy has to get up and snatch the bowl from Kris because a coughing fit has consumed the boy's very soul, but that's okay. He ashes it and passes it to Chet, who begins to fill 'er up.

"Yo I got greens on this one, right Chet?"

cough cough cough

"Yeah, sure man, whatever you want."

Cough cough cough.

"Word, I'mma hit it like croupy over there, just you watch."

Cough Cough Cough Cough!

"Hah, I believe it m—"

COUGH COUGH COUGH COUGH FUCKIN' COUGH!

"DUDE," Jimmy yells at the man sitting hardly an arm's length away from him in the middle of the woods at two o'clock in the morning in a state park where camping, with or without a permit, is illegal. "DRINK WATER OR MAN THE FUCK UP! C'MON!" Jimmy then punches himself in the chest a few times, asserting dominance like a gorilla.

Kris, of course, does neither of these things, opting to just keep coughing. Chet cools the mood down by packing the bowl far beyond its rim, piling up enough pot to knock an elephant on its ass. He passes the miniature marijuana mountain to a suddenly wide-eyed Jimmy. Just as he's about to light it though, Kris totally ruins the moment by spitting out a chunky mouthful of blood, some of which splatters on the fire, releasing a sticky, sick cloud of cooked-smelling smoke.

"YO! WHAT THE FUCK?!" as Jimmy jumps up, dropping the bowl and shattering it. Psychoactive herbage flies everywhere, the majority of the flakes landing in the small pool of blood.

Kris's breathing is getting laborious. He clutches his own throat with both hands and yelps out in pain, like a puppy who got closed in a car door. His left arm then slowly returns to his side, like he wasn't telling it to move.

"Kris!" Jimmy shouts, leaping over the fire to try to help the poor bastard. He leans Kris up against the log, then, "His hand is... Chet, his fucking hand is stuck to his fucking throat, what the fuck did you give him to smoke?!"

Meanwhile, Chet has been sitting motionlessly on the log with an expression of sheer terror carved into his face with a jagged piece of glass. His friends yelling at him brings him back into the moment.

“Just weed! I-I got it out of my stash after work!”

Chet hurdles the fire and helps Jimmy in trying to pull Kris’s hand from around his neck, but it won’t budge.

“Fuckin’ liar!” Jimmy yells out. “Me and Kris lifted all your pot after you came home on your break! GAH!” At last Kris’s arm falls to his side, the hand covered in blood and puncture wounds as if it got hit with a shotgun blast and put through a meat grinder.

“Wait, what? You guys stole my weed?”

“You *clearly* fuckin’ know we did, you poisoned Kris! Fuckin’ tried to poison me!”

“NO! No Jimmy, if you guys took my weed then we’ve been smoking it all night! I have no idea what’s going on right now, this isn’t m– oh fucking hell, look at his hand! Uh, FUCK! Uh, yeah, I-I-I ran home after work and grabbed a little bit out of my stash, I left it all on my bed! Oh fuck, look at his,” he gags, “look at his neck!”

Jimmy, doing just that, notices a myriad of small, needle-like crystalline structures jutting out from Kris’s neck. Kris, meanwhile, has stopped breathing, and falls face first into the fire pit. Jimmy and Chet go to grab him, but then they freeze when they both hear a loud **WHOOP** echo through the forest.

The two boys who are still alive freeze like the crystals poking out of the dead boy’s neck.

“Um...” Jimmy says, shaking in his skater shoes he wore instead of hiking boots. “What the fuck was *that*?!”

“It...” Chet says, swallowing nervously. “It almost... sounded like... like... Tiny Tim...”

“No,” Jimmy creaks as he backs up. “No, nononono, FUCK NO! You’re just, you’re just crazy! You’re a fuckin’ psycho, this is all just... this is all just a game to you!”

“Jimmy,” Chet says in a grave voice, the last tone of voice he’ll ever be able to take. “No, I–”

“FUCK YOU CHIP!” Jimmy screams before darting off into the forest, leaving Chet alone with a partially burning human body. *And Tiny T–*

Jimmy’s footsteps quickly and abruptly come to a halt. Save for the *crackle* of the cackling fire, everything in the gusty forest is still; the silence is deafening. If Chet had any food left in his stomach whatsoever, it would undoubtedly be in his pants right now. The silence continues for a few savory moments before it’s broken into pieces by heavy footsteps and a muffled screaming coming from the direction in which Jimmy sprinted off.

There, appearing into the light across the campfire from Chet, is Jimmy’s floating body. But it isn’t floating, is it, Chet? No, that’s just your mind projecting

a certain hallucination over reality in order for you to feel less stress upon perception. Jimmy's body is certainly suspended, but not voluntarily like that twisted porn you watch; no, its being held there by a gigantic, brawny, *hairy* ape fist, the fingers encapsulating Jimmy's little head like it was a ping pong ball. Just as soon as the veil is lifted and Chet realizes that he's the star of a horror movie, the fist tightens, crushing Jim-jam-a'reeno's head like it was a rotten clementine and dropping the body so it can drain out and feed the forest.

It is at this point that Chet decides he's had enough. He screams, yells, shrieks, hollers, you get the point, before leaping over Kris's body (which has ignited the campsite into an inferno) and sprinting off into the darkness. A **WHOOOP** and the accompanying footsteps follow him close behind.

Chet can't see anything. Hardly guided by the moonlight that's having trouble moving through the clouds, he miraculously dodges under the branches, over rocks, and between swaying trees for what feels like hours without pause. The footsteps stay right behind him, the heavy breathing of the gigantic *whatever the fuck* keeps the back of his neck warm as a cold wind chills the blood in his palpitating heart to a slush. An owl *hoots*. The fire spreads.

Up ahead of him, Chet notices a small clearing, a hole in the canopy allowing tons of moonlight to spill in and illuminate a spot, a clearing in the woods. Not just any clearing though – The Mundon Commons, the camping spot where Chet and his buddyboys were supposed to sleep under the stars tonight. The spot that Chet built as a homage to... anyway, oh well, better late than never, right?

Engaging maximum overdrive and clearing the crisscrossing thoughts and memories from his head, Chet dashes towards the clearing, only stopping when his foot catches a rock, tripping him up and sending his face directly into the ground.

Except he falls *through* the ground.

Darkness is everywhere. Not just average nighttime darkness, *absolute* darkness. *Existential* darkness. Chet can't see his body, the forest, the monster from his past chasing close behind him; Chet can't see anything. He can't feel anything either, can't orient himself – there's no up, no down, no right, no left, no good or bad, no right or wrong. Nothing, just... pure, undiluted, existential *darkness...* or rather, *nonExistential* darkness. Chet doesn't exist, he never did exist, and as for who wore the mask that knew itself as Chet Skylark, well... whoever he is, someone catches his hand and pulls him back up.

I've Gone Crazy

Suddenly, eventually, and just like it's always been, it's day again. Chet opens

his eyes to a blue sky partially blocked out by a swath of lush green leaves. A certain peaceful feeling's aloft in the air, one Chet hasn't felt in a very long time. Since before he moved to Mundon even, but it's a welcome sip of refreshing spring water. He lifts his head and looks around, this place is very familiar to him; the woven deer statues, the horseshoe rink, the fire pit next to the gigantic rock, the hippie floating in the lotus position a foot above the big rock, it's all here.

'Wait, what?'

"Yo!" Chet calls out after picking himself up out of the dirt. "Yo uh, who... who are you? What's going on here?"

"Hello, Tyler," says the waterfall of brown hair without turning around. "It's been a little while, hasn't it, buddy?"

CheTyler falls back down, one of his minds hitting his skull like a wrecking ball and crushing the other one into neurodust. When he gathers himself, he pauses, then, "...No. No, no no no, that's... that isn't... you're dead, you... you committed suicide on your younger brother's birthday, you... I thought you were dead."

The hippie, still airborne, turns around to face Che— er, I mean Tyler. A joint's hanging out of his smiling mouth as he stares at his old friend from across the campsite. Such a peaceful, knowing smile, as if he understands any of the psychotic nonsense that's gone down here tonight. Almost like... *almost like he's been contro—*

"Oh my god, I've gone crazy. I've literally lost my mind. Sam, is this real? What even is real? Who is Sam? What am I? Who is what? Help me."

Tyler gets on his knees and crawls towards the floating hippie, groveling at the air beneath his folded legs.

"Tee. Chill dude, stand up. There ya go," as he pets Tyler's head like a lost dog. "The only crazy thing you've done is suspect that I killed myself just because you found a gun on top of my mountain. Without the accompanying body, or even bloodstain, that would be present if I *did* kill myself. You jumped to a conclusion, man, and that conclusion brought you next to the edge. Then you jumped off that too, and here we are."

"But... but I—"

"And to answer your question, yes, this is real. *Everything* is real, my friend, at least until it isn't. Unless it never was real, then... *yikes*. You wouldn't be aware of it anyway, in that case."

Tyler contemplates this for a moment, then his brain shorts out again. Through tears he says, "Sam, what's going on?"

"Nah, let me ask you something though. Remember when your family evacuated Quarryville? Because of the Zerocian invasion ship?"

"The... what?"

“The big alien spaceship that appeared over Treering, right next to our houses? Remember?”

Tyler, all of it slowly coming back to him, hesitantly nods.

“Okay, good. So, do you remember seeing any aliens since then? Any at all? Has the word *extraterrestrial* come up even once since you dipped out your mom’s basement and changed your name? Because ever since I left my mom’s attic, dude, I’ve seen nothing *but* spacemen.”

“Um, I... no, I don’t think so. Nobody ever really talked about it, I don’t even know ifAHH!”

The hippie lurches out of the air and tackles Tyler, pinning him down to the ground. Forcing him to stare into his glowing irises that weren’t that green the last time. The hippie says nothing.

Tyler thinks, *‘Holy fuck, are they changing colors? Are those even colors?!’* Then, “Sam, what the fuck is this?!”

The hippie leans in close and whispers into Tyler’s very dusty ear, “It’s not Sam anymore, Tee. It’s ~~S~~am.”

Sam hovers off of Tyler and resumes the lotus position, allowing his buddy to gather himself from the shambles the past few days have reduced him to. Then, “So, see that rock in your hand?”

Tyler looks down and there is, in fact, a rock in his hand. Not just a rock though; a crystal, about six inches in length and shaped like an obelisk ending with a point on both edges. “Woah, where did—”

“You’ll know what to do and when to do it. Don’t worry, you got his. I believe in you. Now,” as he winds up with what appears to be a piece of a metal bedframe, “Without further adeau, toodle-loo.”

CRACK

Tyler Portman

“Ty-LEEEERRRRRR! WAKE the fuck UHHHPPPP! We have to un-PAAAAHHHCK!”

The screeching of his sister’s voice rings in Tyler’s ears like the moon when fuel pods were crashed into it. He jolts awake, hitting his head on the open air above him. He was sleeping on the couch at... his parents’ house? In the living room, no less? What the hell?

Tyler Portman fishes his phone out of his pocket and checks the day – May 5th, 2020.

‘Huh... I guess it was all a dream.’

Fin

The Denizen

The Void clears; I am here, but I am not alone.

Well well well, look who found a monkey suit.

“What can I say? Banks are surprisingly easy to rob when you’re mah—”

AYE! Don’t say the ehM word, there’s none of that here.

“You mean *here* here, or here *here*?”

I’m... not sure what the difference is supposed to be.

“I’m saying I want in. I’m tired of this branch universe bullshit, I want to be part of the main one.”

There’s not a main... *ugh*. Don’t look at me like that, you know it’s not as easy as that.

“Sure it is, you let me into that other branch universe to rob the bank. *Just fucking write the words...*! I promise not to cause too much trouble.”

Enough! Vanish, denizen!

The denizen vanishes; I am alone in The Void.