

ONE TOKE OVER THE LINE

Having endured neck and shoulder pain for many years—a condition that's led me to physical therapy, acupuncture, qigong, TENS machines, rolfing, and electro-cranial stimulation, I thought I'd give medical marijuana a deep inhale.

This is not a substance I've ever chosen to experiment with. In my school days, the classmates of mine who spent their Saturday nights sitting in smoky circles in somebody's basement always struck me as stuck in a sort of perpetual pause from which nothing interesting was likely to arise. This was probably arrogance on my part—the condescension of the chronically sober. But that scene just never spoke to me.

When recreational marijuana became legal in NJ a few months ago, I saw the same crowd again—now gray-haired and lumbering—standing overnight in line for the first dispensaries to open. It looked like the Woodstock Reunion Tour.

I went the medical route. I found a licensed practitioner online; interviewed with her in an office right next door to my old physical therapist; paid two hundred dollars, submitted photos and documents to the State. A week of faxes, scans, and emails—and my NJ Medical Marijuana card arrived in the mail with my grim-looking laminated photo. Unsmiling. No glasses. I looked like an unshaved fugitive the FBI had found hiding in a basement in Bradley Beach. But I carried my card to Garden State Dispensary on Route 1 North (just past Jose Tejas.)

A sign outside the door, printed in letters large enough that even Cheech and Chong could have made them out, read: *Medical Only*.

Inside were twenty white plastic chairs, copies of *Natural Living* to browse. Behind the reception window, a wispy young woman with tattooed arms took my information. I sat for a while trying to read.

“Robert?”

“Yes?” I stood. “I'm not sure where to go. This is my first—”

“Through those doors. Window number three.”

A windowless, high-ceilinged room. All the sales representatives sat behind what looked like a long bar—separated from clients by COVID Plexiglas shields. My representative

was an earnest, voluble, bearded man in his twenties—53 years ago he might have been a zealous concert promoter convincing farmer Max Yasgur that Woodstock was “gonna be small and well controlled.” I explained that I wasn’t interested in getting high; I was there for pain relief. He told me about the edibles that worked for him. He told me about the vapable flowers that worked for his wife’s anxiety and insomnia. And soon his computer was offering me my “Wisdom Discount” (so much more generously phrased than “senior citizen discount.”) It reminded me of when I asked a dermatologist what the discolorations on my wrist were. Instead of calling them “age spots” he called them “maturity markers.”

Back at home, the four illuminated petals on my silver vaporizer—about the size of a butane lighter—glowed blue/purple, then pulsed green.

To be honest, the effect of inhaling this acrid stream was minimal. I told Lynn it felt about as potent as drinking a single glass of wine.

I returned to the dispensary a few weeks later to try a different flower, and I was surprised to see the entire parking lot full. I counted 38 men and women snaking out the door and continuing down the hot sidewalk in front of the store. The *Medical Only* sign was gone. Apparently, the place had gone Recreational, and everyone was welcome. I asked the security guard with the photo badge around his neck: “I’m a medical user; do I have to wait in this line?”

“Got a card?”

I nodded, and I was ushered into the waiting room. Thirteen people stood inside. Some silvered Jon-Stewart types. Giggly young women in tank tops. (More tattoos.) The lucky ones were already leaving, clutching their tiny black paper bags with guilty smiles. Some looked embarrassed. (I think I did.) Some looked proud. The place was as crowded as a post-Christmas sale. Hip-hop music played softly; a young Black man stood in front of his computer terminal, singing along as he entered the numbers from the medical cards.

After about 20 minutes, I’m admitted through the inner double-doors to window 11. The woman behind the Plexiglas looks to be in her mid-twenties, like everyone else working there. She’s as pale as an eggshell. “Is there a time when there are less people here?” I ask. The woman in window 12 answers: “Yeah. When we’re closed.”

All three of us laugh, I'm handed my little bag of drugs, and I think: I'm living in some new world. Paying cash in a marijuana department store... The ground is shifting under my feet; *I can actually feel it.*

I drive out of the parking lot and telephone Lynn in my best Woodstock voice: "*This must be heaven, man!*"

And I laugh to myself as I drive past the Reo Diner. "*The New York State Thruway is closed, man!*"