

AMERICAN

KARMA

Twilight of the Marijuana Gods

Doug Shear

First Words

Mom passed away at the age of ninety-four.

Maybe it was her death that compelled me to finally complete this memoir. She had lived through so much, but remembered so little. I wanted to get it straight while I still could.

It was already an uphill battle. Too much Marijuana, Acid, Peyote, Mescaline, Crystal Meth, Quaaludes, Booze, and Time had passed through our brains.

Phil didn't remember Rachel. Ira didn't remember Sissy. Neither Rachel nor Mack remembered me.

Jimmy's mind was a blank when it came to the Misfits, the Den of Iniquity, the wrinkly Mr. Bruce, or his mistress Julie.

I had forgotten the dusty sex with Carol, in a ditch by the side of the road.

The only way to remember, I realized, was to dip into the tar pit of my memories and dredge up as many facts as I could. That meant driving to St. Pete to visit my ex-boss, Victor Hosler.

Victor, in his seventies, learned to communicate with angels and do past-life regressions. He refused my request to hold a séance for the three friends who died, and refused to ask his angels to have a word with them. But he was perfectly willing to hypnotize me.

We went to his office and closed the shades. I kicked off my shoes, lay on his couch, and turned on the tape recorder. He read from his standard past-life regression script, but instead of going all the way to my birth and beyond, he stopped at July 1971.

I was seventeen years old.

As he asked me questions, the memories bubbled up from my unconscious mind and popped into awareness. The

feelings tagged along. I wanted to remember the facts, not re-experience the emotions.

I fought a rising panic. Victor kept asking questions, personal questions, and I kept answering, almost against my will. I could barely breathe. My ribs started aching and my feet throbbed. My left arm burned. I wanted to get up and leave, but my eyes were shut too tight. Finally I ripped myself out of the trance, grabbed my stuff and fled Victor's house.

On the way back to Miami, I tried not to think. But Victor had peeled away some old, synaptic scab with his clumsy hypnosis. I remembered Bologna Jane and Tina the Monkey Girl. I remembered Nigga Dog. Big Arm. Koscot Interplanetary.

I remembered living with a cult that believed Jesus would forgive Lucifer, who would then resume his rightful place as the greatest angel in all of heaven.

I remembered when I first heard about the suicide.

The memories and emotions wouldn't let up. I pulled off the road and wrote for hours. The hypnosis did everything I hoped it would do. I don't recommend it.

About a week later, I discovered a file folder with the few surviving scribbles from my trip. Most of the handwriting was faded, or illegible. As I flipped through the scraps I couldn't believe that the seventeen-year-old kid who wrote them was such a pathetic loser. I couldn't believe he was so clueless, so reckless, so damn stupid. I couldn't believe he was *me*.

A few days later, my brother Phil discovered a trove of letters bound together in an old Baby Ruth box. Addressed to the Riley County Jailhouse in Manhattan, Kansas, they cast a bright light on a dark time that nobody wanted to remember.

So this is my story. It's a true story, as far as I know.

But it's also possible that over the last thirty-six years, my imagination, dreams, and nightmares created memories as fictional as any tale told by a madman.

PIPE DREAMS

Mary from Maryland

Nixon and I share a fat joint in the patio of my parent's home in Little Havana. Just a few feet away, in the sunken Florida Room, Mom and Dad watch TV. The volume is turned way up to compete with the roar of jets skimming across the roof, and the howling of dogs unleashed by our new Cuban neighbors.

When the Cubans first swarmed into Shenandoah, they crammed dozens of new homes onto the empty lots I played in as a child. They planted Kumquat and Papaya trees that stunk up the neighborhood with an exotic, foul odor. They built fences for their chickens and roosters, which escaped every night.

And on their front lawns, trapped inside illuminated glass cages, life-sized San Lazaro statues leaned on their crutches, oblivious to the plastic dogs snarling about their bloodied legs.

Of course, these selfsame Cubans brought heavy-breasted teenage girls, so I'm not complaining.

The Florida Room door is open to the patio so my parents can enjoy the humid breeze. Plenty of marijuana smoke whiffs into the house. But Dad's puffing on his Revelation Tobacco, which dominates the smell of pot. It doesn't matter. They still believe it is incense.

I take a deep toke, amazed that my parents are so clueless and out of touch with the real world.

Nixon's mother, who lives in the Black section of Coconut Grove, knows we smoke pot. She just doesn't give a shit.

"I can't believe what you're telling me," Nixon says. "I'm sorry, Doug, I just don't think you should go. Even if Mary is real, you'll never find her."

"She is real," I insist. "She lives on a hundred acre farm, in Maryland."

"Right, like Winnie the Pooh."

A thunderous plane blasts overhead. We wait for it to pass.

"No, not like Winnie the Pooh," I pick up. "It's a true Utopian Society, Nixon. We grow our own marijuana."

“Are you sure, Doug? Or are you just making it up as you go along?”

“No. I heard it from a guy who lives there, a really cool guy who gave me a ride. He said everyone works in the garden during the day, but at night it’s rock and roll. People dance naked. Everyone showers together.”

“The men and women shower together? Really?”

“Sure. It’s like the Garden of Eden, but without all the silly rules.”

“Are there any Black people?”

“Sure. Black, green, blue, who cares?”

“I want to go with you.”

The joint is a sputtering nub, too hot to squeeze between my thumb and forefinger. I raise it to the sky and give my best impression of a high priest.

“A sacrifice,” I intone, “to the Marijuana Gods!”

“To the Marijuana Gods!” Nixon echoes, with reverence. We bow our heads and share a sacred moment.

“And to Mary,” I add. “Mary from Maryland.”

“Hail Mary,” Nixon says.

I flick the sparkling roach high into the air where it flashes into oblivion, consumed and approved by the Marijuana Gods. Now all I need to do is convince my parents.

I join them at dinner time for the Wednesday Special -- baked chicken, broccoli and mashed potatoes. Then I slug down my glass of water and start off, "Mom, Dad, there's this lady in Maryland..."

I tell them about everything, except the marijuana crops and the coed showers. I also mention that Mary from Maryland offers scholarships to a nearby University.

Well, it might be true.

I do an excellent job of presenting my case, and just hope they don't want to come with me. But as soon as I finish and take a breath, my parents burst out laughing.

"That's a hell of a good story," Dad says.

A plane approaches and drowns us out. As usual, we continue our conversation before its audible.

"It's not a story, Dad, it's true. I'm leaving on July fourth, Independence Day."

"What?"

"July fourth."

"What about it."

"I'm hitchhiking to Maryland, to find Utopia."

"You do that, buddy boy."

"I'm serious, Dad."

"What about college?" Mom asks. "You graduated early because you couldn't wait to go to college."

"No, I couldn't wait to get out of high school."

"But what about your future?"

"Dad," I patiently explain, because after all he needs to know these things, "the United States and the Soviet Union are going to have a nuclear war and destroy the world. Why should I worry about anything?"

For some reason that infuriates him.

"I'll give you one goddamn thing to worry about," he threatens, raising his hand for a back swing.

"Not the mouth!" Mom yells. "Remember the braces!"

The dogs of war begin to howl, spreading from one yard to another, street by street, until the entire neighborhood is

filled with canine fury. Even San Lazaro's plastic dogs are howling in their illuminated boxes.

Dad grabs me by the collar of my Blissburger tie-dyed t-shirt and drills into me with his metal-grey eyes. For tortuous seconds he just stares at me, boring deeper and deeper, exposing my shivering, insecure core as only a loving father can. I start to blink, then look away.

He releases me and sits back, stunned by my ignorance. He looks up at the ceiling.

"I would have sold my soul to go to college," he tells the Jewish God. "And my son would rather be a hobo."

"I'd rather be a hobo than sell my soul," I tell him.

"Easy to say when you've never been a hobo," he retorts. "Try eating nothing but ketchup soup for a few weeks and you'll sell your soul for a hamburger."

I grab my plate and head into the kitchen, planning to escape through the side door, but they follow me. We scrape our plates into the brown Publix shopping bag Mom uses for garbage.

I'm desperate to say something to break the silence, but I'm afraid to even clear my throat. I put my plate in the sink, move to the living room and head for the front door.

"You're going to get yourself killed!" Dad calls after me. "Alone, on the road."

"I'll be safe, Dad. Nixon's coming with me."

"The Black boy?"

"Nixon's not a boy, Dad. We're not boys. We're men."

I watch us in the giant mirror over the fireplace. When I was younger I would stand before that mirror for hours and press my hands against the cold glass, try to somehow melt through to another dimension, into a wonderland of magical creatures and no school. But now all I see is a tall, balding man with a tense face, a short, pudgy woman with worried eyes, and a skinny sullen boy with a big nose, long hair and a scraggly beard.

"Don't do this to me, Doug," Mom begs. "I'll worry about you."

She dabs her eyes with a paper towel. I hate to see her all weepy. A wave of guilt rushes through me like a snort of crystal meth.

"I'm not doing anything *to* you, Mom. I'm doing this *for* me. I have to do this."

"Why? You're an intelligent boy. Can't you explain?"

I run my hands over the stippled walls. I hate them, for all the times they scraped my back during marathon fights with my brother Phil. But I can't answer Mom's question. Dad answers it for me.

"Because he's a stupid idiot," he tells her. And just in case I hadn't heard, he repeats it for me. "You're a stupid idiot."

This is a good time to unleash my ultimate weapon.

"You want to know why I'm not going to college, Dad? A good reason."

"There is no good reason."

"I'm taking your advice."

"What?"

“You said to me, if I want to be a writer, I have to experience life. Community college isn’t life. It isn’t even college.”

A plane chainsaws over the roof, giving us a few seconds to breathe and prepare for the next round of arguments. When the noise evaporates, Mom asks, “Why don’t you go to Israel? You can work on a Kibbutz.”

“Mom, Mary’s farm is like a Kibbutz, just, not with all the Jews.”

“Do you even have any money?” Dad asks.

“I don’t need money. I can stay with Mary for free. She’s really groovy, Dad. She’ll feed us, and let us stay as long as we want.”

Mom cries, “You’re only seventeen! You’re a baby!” She begs Dad, “Can we call the police?”

“And do what, honey? Put him in jail until he turns eighteen? He’ll just take off anyway.”

“I will. I’m sick of Miami.”

“How can you be sick of Miami? Miami is paradise.”

“Then I guess I’m just sick of paradise, Dad. I want Utopia.”

Dad surrenders, arms in the air.

“Fine. You want Utopia, Doug, knock yourself out. I’ve always said I’ll give you enough rope to hang yourself. But take my advice. If you’re going to be stupid, you better get tough.”