

From My First Hit

by Michael Jad Cheaito

The first drag I ever took, I was cramped up inside a bathroom stall, pointing my ears towards the sounds of footsteps and creaking doors, and pressing a thin metal rod under my sleeve. My friend, who'd sold it to me, was waiting outside the stall, crafting a smirk as he watched my lungs combust and come back together again. It tasted like Excel gum and the vapour lit the back of my throat up like mouthwash. I was hooked.

As the week progressed, I made stumbling out of school bathrooms a ritual. I'd let my head get light and catch glimpses of my feet shifting, sidestepping, and strolling into classrooms. I'd get good at sliding my vape in and out of my sleeves, under and through t-shirts, and back to my mouth in front of bystanders and snitches; I learned how to zero a hit. I'd begun to practise all those classic, clinical moves that teenagers have made look pretty for years. In my juvenile way, I think I sometimes used the passive feeling of being hunted as an excuse for my behaviour.

It was my eleventh-grade year and my first at boarding school. I'd adapted quickly enough to the change in environment, despite how sudden it was. I was anxious to move on with a lot of the emotional baggage – the depression and anxiety that I'd only later get help with – that I had unwittingly brought with me. I didn't know how down bad I still was, but I also didn't know how easy it was to access escapes that I shouldn't have been able to. There's something to be said about the gut-stopping feeling of wonder that comes about when someone offers you an express route to altered consciousness in the disposable form of a vape pen, and then slides open a dorm room window, just for you, so you can blow the smoke out.

It didn't take long for me to transition from just nicotine to other substances. My first dab pen was a slick, cylinder-shaped dream with a purple bulb at the end that backlit a marijuana leaf. It was filled with cannabis concentrate, which is made by infusing butane with cannabis and evaporating it to create the concentrate, and was probably cut with vegetable glycerin or some unknown additive. Most people around me understood weed as a good time, but from the very second that it didn't send me spinning out and terrified, I understood that I had discovered a new, irresistible way of being.

Some cannabis advocates will tell you that it isn't addictive, but if you've ever struggled with substance abuse and depression, you'll understand the allure of sliding into worlds where no one can hurt you. I started smoking a few times a week, then throughout weekends, and sometimes, even a few days in a row. As 2020 opened up, I sent about 40 sprays of THC oil to the back of my throat, and it would be over a year before I'd find myself sober the next day.

The more integrated cannabis was in my schedule, the easier it became to compartmentalize. Classes I didn't like became waiting rooms for getting high; curfews transformed the ends of the days into the starts of new ones; spare periods were ripe opportunities to take up a bathroom that nobody else wanted and kick the day forward a few hours. I'd mastered an art of avoidance where, even if only fleetingly, all of my problems could be sucked in and evaporated with the simple press of a button. I'd grow to love a lot of people at boarding school, but the entire time I was using, I really did find it difficult to appreciate any one person more than that golden getaway device I'd kept hidden in my pocket all day long.

The power of drugs, cannabis included, is that they cheat your brain into believing you've achieved something real when you haven't. With the power to reliably manifest all the feel-good you could muster comes the responsibility of self-control. Unfortunately, self-control is a quality that evades a sizable portion of Canadian teens, and I know that it's one I've never quite been

able to grasp. The resulting tragedy is that one day, when you have to stop using, you find that the high was, in fact, entirely ephemeral, and all the logic and precedents of your drug habit are left to hang like the old lies of an abusive ex.

You might start to look back and find friendships that have slowly withered. Skates you should've learned to use but chose to substitute with an escape as a way of spending time. Countless, precious moments that you spent asleep or just can't remember. You might find yourself recording your eighth attempt to tell your Arabic grandmother that you miss her because you don't know the words anymore. At the worst of my withdrawals, I was completely disoriented. With the simple absence of less than a gram of material, the purpose I had been chasing for a year had instantly disappeared and left me with nothing but unanswered texts from my dad and the feeling of lost time.

What worries me the most when thinking about the choices I made, day in and day out, is that no matter how obviously harmful they were – how clear it was that I was hurting myself – they always seemed mostly rational. I was making wrong decisions, but they were made measurably more feasible because of what started off as a struggle with depression and turned into an addiction. Parents, teachers, and adults who care only have so much of an arsenal when it comes to how to help kids struggling with substance abuse. When we appreciate that drug abuse is a mental health problem, we edge closer to understanding and helping the kids who find themselves on the fringe, rather than reminding them why they hid there in the first place.

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