

The young man went to Joshua Tree to get spiritually well. That was where they told him to go. Into nature. With the drugs.

There was no better place to do the drugs, they said. The chaos of the city was too much, especially for a first timer. So, the young man went there with the mushrooms and the acid and the ashes of his dead dog.

Previously he had laid on the table of a man who waved stones over his body and told him how he might rebalance his chakras in order to find peace. But his dog had died and that was a pain deep beneath the chakras. He couldn't make it make sense, even to a mystic. It was a tear to the fabric that stitched humankind to mother nature. He felt cast out into space, floating through a silent vacuum of grief, feeling like he would suffocate long before reaching distant stars of happiness.

He had chalked up the signs of the dog's poor health as the likely onset of doggie middle age and ignored the change in his behavior. Only after a swelling in the neck, lymph nodes hard and round as marbles, he learned that it was cancer instead. Lymphoma. And it had been too late. In the solitary, internal destitution of losing his dog, drugs seemed like an outstanding idea. He thought maybe letting go of something painful like his guilt would help him welcome in something pleasant. He needed more pleasant things in his life.

The dog rested heavily in a compostable box with a brown wooden name tag tied to it by a thick piece of twine. The name tag had bits of bark around its edges and looked rustic, like a Nana's Cottage gift shop had incinerated the old boy and presented his ashes in the quaintest way possible, a sort of morose log cabin.

If the crematorium had told him the box weighed ten pounds, he would've insisted it weighed ten thousand. He laid a hand on it and memories tickled his palm like a scoopful of tadpoles.

This was the place to let him go, he thought. This was the place to let him go? He immediately second guessed himself. This hot, desolate place and these silly, stupid drugs. Against the behest of men who waved powerless stones over his body, he came to do this task alone. It was encouraged that his first trip be in the company of someone to guide him, who had had this experience at least once before and could be there to help him if anything went wrong.

But one time he'd spent many hours on the phone with a girl he had loved who lived in New York while he was living in Los Angeles and she had taken mushrooms with friends, gone off on her own into the night, and seemed to be just fine. He wondered how bad it could really be.

The desert in the Yucca Valley just before Joshua Tree felt more isolated than he had imagined. In the late Spring there, wind blew through it with a kind of mercy that the Santa Anas had never shown him in San Diego or Los Angeles. That kind of heated landscape was not unfamiliar to him. He had spent his summers in Northern California in a small town called Redding. One would never have guessed the coolness of Shasta Lake was nearby. In Redding, it seemed, existed only horses and heat.

His summers had been spent with those horses, cleaning, feeding, riding, caring for them. They were such a different breed of mammal than the dog, he thought. He remembered the time he witnessed the putting down of a horse at a veterinary clinic. Seeing the massive knees buckle as the beast slowly crippled to the ground was like watching a nation burn from a short distance. And the sound it makes when its body hits the earth is hard and thick and infinite and one never forgets how it feels in the soles of their shoes, like the death of a God vibrating against their feet.

His car sat dusty and alone on a driveway made of rocks and the wind traveled with a low howl beneath tan tarps that hung overhead. His first night was spent with beer and bourbon. The homeowner who rented the property also had a small Crosley record player and an eclectic array of vinyl's that previous guests had abused and so they skipped and popped with a charm most people expected. It was so quiet that he was plunged inward upon arrival. He stood outside on the patio beneath the tarps and stared out at a vastness that begged the question of why it had ever been populated in the first place. He could not shake the uncomfortable realization that places such as this were virtually uninhabitable landscapes that humankind purposefully pumped resources into, to give mere mortals the sense of accomplishment that if they could not colonize Mars or the Moon, at least they could have brunch and day drink in a place like Palm Springs.

When he was bloated and drunk he took his clothes off and stood naked, sweating in the ninety-six-degree heat that lasted into the evening. He peed wherever he desired. He was reminded of the freedom that came with exterior urination. How almost instantaneously it made him feel like a four-year-old with all the power in the world to tell an arbitrary invention like the bathroom, *I think not*.

He wondered about his salvation, whatever that meant. He wondered if his irresponsibility for his best friend's health meant he would go to hell. Maybe this was the vision he would receive when he took the drugs. A fire and brimstone landscape just like the desert he stared at, his soul like scorched earth. What truth he sought, he wasn't entirely sure. But of what guilt he hoped to relieve, he was certain. Like his best friend, he hoped deep down he was a good boy. He didn't want coal in his stocking that year. He didn't want to keep abusing himself the way he had been.

The home featured guide books for things like meditation and yoga and even offered services where instructors and healers would come to the house for a day, and a fee, to guide the temporary resident through the out of body experience of letting go of whatever it was they had brought with them.

He did the drunken unthinkable and used the home's landline to call the number listed, intending to inquire about something called a "fire ceremony." He had no idea what a fire ceremony was, but from what he'd known about phoenix's and ashes, and considering the ashes he now clutched tight against his chest, he thought fire would be the best baptism.

"Hey there, Casa Desert Dan," a woman's voice said on the other end of the line.

"Who the fuck is Dan?" he asked instinctively, immediately regretting his language.

"You're staying at Casa Desert Dan," the voice said, hearing the mild slur in his speech and worrying she may be the victim of a drunk dial. "We have the landline saved in our contacts."

"Oh." He flipped the pages of the guidebook back to its cover and now saw the bold typeface **Welcome to Casa Desert Dan**. "Yes, I guess I am at Dan's casa. In the desert," he said. "Tell me about this fire ceremony."

The woman sighed, feeling chastised by a drunk who inherently did not take their services seriously.

"Our fire ceremony is a one-hour experience with one of our shamans. It's designed to illustrate and help you experience the cyclical process of life, death, and rebirth."

Son of a bitch, he thought. It was exactly what he thought it would be. Motherfuckin phoenix.

“I see.” He cleared his throat, deepened his voice, and over pronounced his words, hoping to sound sober. “And it is only one hour?”

“One hundred fifty for the hour, yes.”

“Fire is notoriously tricky isn’t it? What happens if the newspaper he brings as kindle doesn’t catch and the fire takes an hour to start?”

“I stress his experience,” she said, matter-of-factly.

“So, he’s a Shaman.”

“He is. Yes.”

He could tell she was ready to hang up so he said, “Fuck it. Let’s book it.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. I’m sure. Send him tonight. Right away”

“I’m afraid we’ll have to find a time for this tomorrow.”

“But what if my rebirth can’t wait until tomorrow?”

“Well it’s 5:47 and we close at 6. So your rebirth has no choice but to wait til tomorrow.”

“God damn it,” he whispered.

“I’m sorry?”

“Nothing. Nothing. Tomorrow’s fine. What time? When’s the best fire ceremony window? Like early morning or sunset. Probably sunset right?”

“We have a 1pm and a 3pm available.”

“Oh.” He glared out the window at the early evening sun, as bright and hot as its midday position. “Isn’t that kind of a weird time for fire? Middle of the afternoon?”

“Fire is,” she said. “So, it’s always going to be when it is.”

“Right.” He had the sense that she imparted something profound on him but was too drunk to learn it. “Okay. Let’s do 1pm.”

“Great.” He could hear that she was typing. “Please avoid taking any substances prior to the Shaman’s arrival. Be sure to eat breakfast. And please keep hydrated.”

“You got it,” he hicc’ed.

“If you are visibly or obviously intoxicated or under the influence, you will forfeit your payment and the Shaman will be forced to leave the premises,” she said sternly.

“Understand,” he said.

“If you are visibly or obviously intoxicated or under the influence, you will forfeit your payment and the Shaman will be forced to leave the premises,” she said again.

He paused, unsure if she had repeated herself or if he had drunkenly imagined her speaking twice.

Then, as he gave her his credit card information, he suddenly got emotional and afraid he’d upset some kind of unknown Gods and asked, “Are you going to tell desert Dan on me?”

“No,” she said. “Dan’s dead, anyway. His daughter Silvia owns the property now.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. About Dan.” A brief silence. “You know, my dog died.”

“Oh. I didn’t know.” More silence. “I’m also sorry.”

“Thank you.”

He heard printing in the background and she said, “Okay, you’re all set for tomorrow at 1pm. Please remember the instructions I told you.”

“I will.” He held up his hand in a scout’s honor even though she couldn’t see him.

They hung up and he continued drinking well after the sun had gone down. He crossed his fingers that the hate he had for himself could be drowned, that pesky guilt, that favorite memory, that lingering question. *Who’s a good boy?*

Then he stood outside under the moon, naked like a Devil worshiper. He swigged bourbon from the bottle, peeing periodically, and drawing symbols in the dirt with his feet until every voice in his head was quiet and he could sleep.

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“But you’re white,” the young man said as the Shaman arrived at 1pm the next day.

“Do I need to express to you how the implication you’re making sounds?” asked the Shaman carefully.

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” The young man had shotgunned a beer that morning for breakfast to ease his hangover and to combat the depression that came with drinking too much in his thirties.

An hour before the Shaman’s arrival he took the drugs. One tab of acid and all of the mushrooms. Only he didn’t count the amount of stems and caps in the bag because he had no idea what that meant when his friend said whatever it was she had said about being careful. It had also been recommended that he do them both on separate days and to ground the mushrooms up and sip them in a tea like a gentleman, but he was embracing living like an asshole now. His depression laughed in danger’s face! He had also heard that psilocybin tasted so foul they were the only thing akin to what it would taste like to eat shit. He had to know.

It was untrue, he thought. He enjoyed their earthy quality. Then he wondered if that meant he was someone who would enjoy the taste of shit.

When he realized he was doing every possible thing he could in spite of the Casa Desert Dan guidebook lady’s suggestions, he had to consider if he was doing it all to be intentionally antagonistic to a way of life he had never fully understood. He could be a shit that way. Mysticism, religion, spirituality, ignorantly assuming all Shamans had to be brown, doing drugs for the sake of out of body experiences and receiving intergalactic messages, none of it was exactly his thing. But the importance of these things had been stressed to him and he was going to experience them the way they had been stressed. He was promised that God, the Universe, had a message. If the only way to receive that message was via the drugs and this arid climate, so be it.

“What’s your name?” he asked the Shaman.

“Jeff,” the Shaman said coolly, as he was setting up his little fire. His tone suggested he may have been warned by the guidebook lady that he’d had an appointment with a drunk.

“Shaman Jeff...” the young man pondered the sound of it.

“That’s me,” Shaman Jeff said, standing. He looked down at the makeshift fire pit he had made, rocks stacked neatly in a small circle set several feet away from the house for safety.

He wore a long linen cloak over a simple white t-shirt and cut off denim shorts. His hair was long but clean and the young man thought he smelled great. As he knelt down to light the fire, his necklace dangled dangerously near it and he wore so many rings that the young man wondered if they would become superheated and burn his hands.

“Careful Jeff,” he whispered.

Shaman Jeff stood and stared at him for several seconds, sizing up his intentions.

“What’s wrong?”

“Why don’t you tell me?” Jeff said, brow furrowing.

The young man felt spotted and froze.

“What did you take?” Jeff asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You know, we get assholes like you all the time.”

“Don’t you upset God when you talk like that, Jeff?”

“You don’t think we know how to deal with guys like you? Dudes coming out from LA to do shrooms and act like shitheads?”

The young man’s eyes shifted away, his lids thoughtful slits, wondering just how many young men like him the Shaman had encountered.

“We’re trained to usher people through this experience, you know. But Silvia said you sounded drunk on the phone yesterday, so I better be careful.”

“The guidebook lady is Silvia?” The young man looked panicked. “Desert Dan’s daughter?”

“Correct.”

“Oh my God.” He sat down on a small tree stump stool that looked like it had been handcrafted by some local artisan. “Oh my God,” he repeated, rubbing his face, a slight numbness in his cheeks. “Oh God.”

“It’s fine. Like I said, guys like you...you’re kind of the norm. How much did you take?”

“I don’t know. A bag of mushrooms. And an acid? How do you quantify it?”

Shaman Jeff rubbed his forehead and said, “Christ.”

Then the young man started to panic and asked, “Is this how a bad trip begins, Jeffrey? Am I going to trip badly?”

“You’re going to be fine if you stop trying to process whatever it is you’re going through by getting wasted enough to deflect it and using it to make other people feel small.”

The young man felt uniquely called out and ashamed and wondered if Jeff moonlit as a therapist.

“I’m not going to lie to you Jeff, I think I’m still a little drunk from yesterday.”

“You don’t have to lie, I can tell. And if you’re not careful it’s going to get a whole lot worse.”

“Fuck,” the young man said. And then he yawned. “Do I—should I make myself throw up?”

“Just stay here,” Jeff said and entered the house.

The young man looked out at the barrenness in front of him and felt sick. The quiet was deafening. He wondered how far it was to the mountains he could see in the distance and how long it would take to walk there. Then he realized how perfectly flat the desert was and that, unlike the forest, there was no need to cut a trail. If he had wanted, he could have walked from where he was sitting out to the mountains almost entirely unimpeded except for the occasional

bush. But the bushes looked small and weak and he figured he could just walk straight through them or kick them over if he wanted to.

“Fuck you bushes,” he said quietly to himself. Shaman Jeff came and sat next to him and handed him a glass of water.

“You feeling a little nauseous?” Jeff asked.

“I guess,” the young man said, not wanting to look scared in front of a Shaman. “Mostly just feeling bad about Silvia and me having brought up her dead dad.”

“And what about your dog?”

The young man looked at him.

“Silvia told me,” Jeff said. “Figured it was something you wanted to work through.”

Then the young man vomited and Jeff sidled up next to him and rubbed his back. “Fuck you, Jeff,” the young man said despite the courtesy, choking on the words like he was going to cry.

“I know,” Jeff said. “Have you done either of these before?”

“No.”

“Oof. Okay. Did you even want to do this?”

“Not really.”

“Then why did you come here to do it?”

“Because everyone told me I needed this.”

“I don’t think you need anything you don’t want, man.”

The young man looked at Shaman Jeff. “What’re you, some kind of psychologist?”

“Something like that.”

“It’s going to get a lot worse for a long time, isn’t it?”

“Handful of hours.”

“No, the dog.”

“Oh. Well I mean, loss is like waves of grief, you know? Periods of stillness between violence.”

“Sweet,” said the young man.

Shaman Jeff laughed. “Have you ever lost anyone before?”

“No.”

“I guess, the thing I end up telling most people is...no. It doesn't ever go away. But it gets easier. The stillness between waves lasts longer.”

“Does this mean you have to babysit me, Jeff? Did I fuck up your day?”

“You're definitely gonna have a rough ride but you're not going to like, stab yourself all over your body because you think there's bugs under your skin or anything like that.”

“That is actually very good to know.” The young man let out a sigh of relief, his awareness now suddenly crystal clear that the youth anti-drug programs that came to his school as a child were lies.

“It'll get weird, but you'll be alright. I can't really stay; I've got another one of these at 3.”

“Right, right.” The young man stood up and saw a lizard in the distance he didn't trust.

“Go inside and stay inside and keep hydrated.” Shaman Jeff led him to the house and ushered him in, refilling his water.

The young man sat and stared at a woven tapestry on the wall and asked, “That's really just a decorative blanket, isn't it?”

“Yeah, I guess it is.” Jeff handed him the water and could see his longing look at the tapestry. “Do you want to wear it?”

“Kinda.”

Shaman Jeff took the tapestry off the wall and draped it over the young man.

“Thank you, Jeff.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I’ll still pay you the \$150.”

“You paid last night when you gave Silvia your credit card info.”

“Oh God, Silvia!” the young man said, his head hung low under the tapestry.

“She’s fine. You’ll be fine, okay?”

“Okay.”

Jeff watched him another moment, a sad little decorative blanket ghost, a Pac-Man villain.

“You’ve been so nice to me, Jeff. I’ve been such an asshole.”

“Yeah, well, people aren’t assholes for no reason. I hope you find yours and get over it.”

“Wow.”

“Sorry.”

“No, I deserve it. Thank you.”

“Bye.”

“Goodbye, Jeffrey.”

Then Shaman Jeff left.

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Several centuries seemed to pass and the young man stared at the emotionally heavy pandora’s box of ashes. As best he could, he tried to analyze the experience he was undergoing. It was only a little like the movies.

A colorful, patterned piece of art opposite him churned slowly like a pinwheel. He watched it a while until he looked ahead, out the glass double doors at the vastness of the desert.

He watched a flock of birds peck at something dead and wondered if it might be him. Maybe they were eating him and this present moment of consciousness was only a projection, the remaining synapses in his brain firing until he expired. Maybe there was no Shaman Jeff. Maybe there was no Casa Desert Dan guidebook lady named Silvia, Desert Dan's daughter.

As he stood, he realized he was walking on water to reach the door. He touched the knob and folded it in his hand and stepped through the portal it opened so that he was now on Mars. It was hot on Mars. He was reminded again of the uninhabitable landscape but then remembered that indigenous people had lived in deserts for thousands of years and pumping resources into them to make them more habitable was really just an insult to something they hadn't needed science to do for them.

"hey," a gentle voice said in a distant monotone. He looked down and saw his best friend sitting there. It was the dog. "don't walk on those rocks. they're lava."

The young man looked in front of him and watched the lava stream ooze past. "Thanks," he said, then scratched himself and asked, "How did you get here?"

"walked," said the best friend. "love walks."

"From where?"

"far."

"I see." The young man reached out to pet him but the best friend stepped backward toward a council of lizards watching patiently.

"Is that not allowed?" the young man asked.

"my fur is too hot. i do not want you getting burned."

"Fair." He could see the heat rising from the fur like vapor waves cresting over blacktop. "I came out here to see you."

"i know. and now you are seeing me. how do i look?"

"Like I miss you."

"you look the same."

“Are you hot because you went to hell?”

“all dogs go to heaven. that much in life is true.”

“That is very important information to take back to my friends.”

“i do not know why you needed the mind haze and the poo plant.”

“Wanted to try it. People said I should.”

“you are still doing what others say you should?”

“Maybe.” The young man was starting to feel chastised by his infinitely wise pal.

“you told me everything.”

“You remember it all?”

“even the very secret things,” the best friend said with a wry smile.

“Oh,” said the young man.

“you should not be ashamed of yourself and your secrets. i am proud of you.”

“You’re proud of me?”

“yes.”

The young man looked back behind him. A fog had settled over the entrance to Capra
Dessert Dean.

“i am not really in that box.”

“Feels like you are.” The young man’s eyes were getting wet.

“i came back to tell you something.”

“I came here to tell you something, too.”

“what was it?”

“I don’t want to say it, now that you’re here.”

“but i am not.”

“God damn it, I know!” The young man’s face twisted into anger and he watched his best friend’s eyes melt into empathy, head hung. “Don’t do that!”

“do what?” asked the best friend, and the young man hated that even in his mind his raised voice could make the dog’s body cower.

“It always looks like whenever I’m going through some shit you feel bad for me.”

“but i do.”

The young man braved the lava and stepped forward but now it was glass and he stood on the most delicate ground there ever was.

“You’re not supposed to feel bad for me. I’m supposed to feel bad for me. For you.”

“you are too mean to you.”

“I know.”

“it is funny.”

“What is?” The young man could not look at him.

“the humans constantly say to us, ‘good boy’ or ‘good girl’ like we need to be reminded. but the reminder is not for us.”

The young man sat down onto the local artisan crafted bean bag chair. “What do you mean?”

“humans want to know they are good. want to know they are doing good. want to know their good is seen. want to know they are loved. so the question is not for us dogs. the question is for the human. but they do not know how to tell themselves. do not know how to ask themselves the question.”

“What question is that?”

“who is a good boy?”

“You are.”

“no.” The best friend walked over the glass and sat next to the young man and put his paw on top of his hand. “you are.”

The young man could feel the best friend’s hot paw and then his face tightened and he dipped briefly into sanity and regretted that he took the drugs but knew he would not have heard these words without them.

“You were my best friend,” said the young man.

“you were my only friend,” said the best friend. Then he got up and looked at the sun.

“Thanks for showing up.”

“no. i did nothing. you came here. you ate the poop. you see me but you hear you.”

“You’re sure you’re not in that box?”

“i am sure. you may sprinkle it if you would like. maybe my sand pieces will make trees other dogs can pee on. that would make me happy.” Then he made his way back toward the curious lizard council.

“Why are you hanging out with them?”

“they know the way to the other side. it would be a very long walk back.” And the young man watched one of the lizards *tok* his tiny staff twice against the ground, opening the portal. The best friend looked at him one last time, longingly.

“I’m sorry I failed you,” said the young man, finally crying.

“do not become the liquid eyes, only friend. you did not fail me,” said the best friend.

“How do you know?” Asked the young man, angry with himself. “How can we know that?”

“because you are a good boy.”

The dog’s mouth opened into that familiar pant of a smile as he wagged his tail. The young man smiled too, and laughed. But not in a mean way. In the way two tired, weary souls survive a war and reflect on their horror with humor to ensure their heartstrings stay tied together.

He understood the pet now, mother earth's temporary allowance to tend to her glory. To be responsible for one of her great champions. Then he heard the portal zap shut and knew his best friend was finally gone. And in the distance where he looked, he thought he saw a crow become a sausage.