Corner It

It was a hazy Sunday in May, 2015, around three in the afternoon. I was standing in line at my local McDonald's, as a man of my generous proportions is want to do, fighting through the familiar, comfortable daze of being stoned so I could decide if I wanted to fill my arteries with the chicken nuggets or the quarter-pounder, and that's when I saw the man. He was of average build, wearing jeans and a sweatshirt, looking like any person just trying to mind their own business, standing off to the side of the line, glancing between his phone and the menu. There was just one problem. His mahogany skin, pointed nose and narrow jaw reminded me of my friend Aaron. And that was a problem because my friend Aaron wasn't there with me.

Aaron was my closest friend in high school, bonded as we were by our hatred of responsibility and our love of cannabis products. We'd share a bowl every morning in one of our cars before class and spend the evenings with our faces buried in bongs. Aaron actually introduced me to the stuff, making him easily the most important character in my embarrassingly cliché white-boy weed story. I remember the first time he smoked me out.

"Corner it," he said to me.

"What?" I quizzed, having no idea what he meant.

He rolled his eyes, "hold the lighter away from the bowl, at a tilt."

He wanted me to only burn a small patch of the weed as I inhaled, avoiding scorching too much bud too soon, and allowing everyone in the rotation – just the two of us in that instance – to enjoy hits of fresh, green weed instead of carbonized plant matter.

Equality. It was about equality.

We had some good times, getting high in the car listening to colorful, vacuous music we'd never entertain without drugs, seeing shitty big budget action films that blew our intoxicated minds, all the while smoking where and when we shouldn't have been. We'd only ever been in any real trouble for it once, each separately, on separate occasions, but under nearly identical circumstances: smoking alone, in our cars, parked in front of our own residences.

And that's why my friend Aaron couldn't be there with me, in line at McDonalds.

People love to refer to their drug of choice with fond pet-names and fantastical descriptions: magic mushrooms, blow, smack, wacky tobaccy, the Devil's cabbage, Mary Jane, etc. I've always though of marijuana as magical, at first because of its ability to make me feel something within my Lexapro fueled existence, and later for its ability to affect the lives of everyone it touches, but in profoundly different ways.

For me, it bought me some peace of mind in exchange for a $300 fine plus some embarrassment and a light coffee stain on my record.

It bought Aaron much the same: peace of mind. But it had cost him more.

We both grew up in the Las Vegas Valley, but Aaron had transferred from Sunset High School in East Downtown Vegas, an area known for economic strife, to Green Valley High School in North Green valley, an area known for being the middlest middle class place around, where I was going during our sophomore year. The reason Aaron transferred was because his family wanted a change of neighborhood after his father was detained for illegal possession of marijuana with intent to sell.

Aaron's father was the general manager of a cellular call center and never had any drugs on him. He was detained because he matched the description of a local dealer. They released him later the same day. But the damage was done, Aaron's father had been equally humiliated and

infuriated by his experience and, compounding with other, more personal reasons, decided a change of neighborhood would be a good idea. I often pointed out to Aaron the irony of taking such pleasure in something that almost ruined his father's life. We laughed about that then. Not so much anymore.

So there I was, waiting in line a McDonald's, awkwardly staring at a man that remined me of the friend that had been taken from me. I must've been looking too long, because at length the man begin to shoot curious glances my way, but it wasn't until he was fully staring back with an irritated furrow in his brow that I finally looked away, doing so abruptly. *He knows,* I remember thinking. *He knows what you allowed to happen, he knows you have no right to be walking around so freely, and he knows you're a piece of shit for it.*

On November 17th, 2014, I was arrested-by-citation for smoking marijuana in my car in front of my house at 1:07 a.m. by Henderson police officers Jacob Alverez and Matthew Hunt. I know this because it was all written on the $300 ticket they gave me. They searched me and my car, confiscated my drugs and paraphernalia, gave me the ticket and went on their way. The whole process took about twenty-five minutes.

Two months later, I appeared on my assigned court date and paid the fine. That was the end of it. For me at least. The judge told me that I was a good kid, college bound as I was, and that he was giving me a chance to stay on the straight and narrow. He said I'd better appreciate this, he said it could've been a lot worse. Neither of us had any idea how right he was.

Now, this shouldn't have been any kind of problem at all, in fact you'd think I would think of it as quite the opposite. But three months later, the state made it into a problem.

On February 11th, 2015, my friend Aaron was arrested for smoking marijuana in his car behind his apartment complex at 10:32 p.m. by Las Vegas Metropolitan police officer James

McDuff. I know this because he told me when I came to pick him up from the Las Vegas City Jail the following morning, after his parents had drained half their savings paying his bail.

Turns out, Aaron had some priors. Well, kind of. When he was 13, he had been caught smoking with his older cousin back in their old neighbor hood twice in the same year. He claimed he hadn't actually been partaking and I had no reason to doubt him, he was playing for his school's basketball team, and they mandated drug tests. But the weed was sprawled out, distributed evenly in the circle of five smokers, incriminating everyone present. So Aaron was given an ugly possession mark on his record both times, his parents forced to pay the fine, and was sent home. We complained to each other about how unfair that seemed on occasion, but it didn't really affect our lives so we largely shrugged it off.

Then, five years later, when Aaron was caught partaking of his own accord, it was his third offense. Before January first, 2017, the third offense of illegal marijuana possession of just over one ounce was deemed drug trafficking. A felony. And just one of those is all it takes to change the course of a life.

But we didn't know that yet. Considering what had recently happened to me, the ease with which I moved through the system, we figured Aaron might face a somewhat higher fine and then be able to move on with his life. In a way, he did move on with his life. Though not in the direction any of us would have preferred.

About nine weeks after his detention, Aaron appeared in court. At seventeen years old he was naturally tried as an adult. I didn't remember my age coming up at my trial. After going over the details of his case, it was time for sentencing. "What does the city recommend?" the judge asked nonchalantly. The city attorney, sitting at a table covered in papers off the side of the room, without look up from the table said, "In light of the defendant's violent prior offenses, the

city recommends fourteen mounts incarceration at Nevada Southern Detention Center." "So ordered," sighed the judge, and casually banged his gavel.

It was the loudest thing I'd ever heard. Almost as loud as the silence that followed, broken only by the jingling of the bailiff's key's as he walked over to steal my friend.

Aaron's mother, understandably, broke down and began weeping uncontrollably, while his father became irate and began boisterously denouncing the injustice of what was happening. His protests were lost beneath the irritated banging of the dreaded gavel. I desperately wanted to do something, anything, to have some kind of reaction to the horror unfolding around me. But I did nothing. I just stood there like a dry blobfish, mouth slightly open, staring blankly ahead, unable to process that my friend's life had been destroyed almost magically quick by the very thing that had only ever brought us so much joy.

The same irony we'd scoffed at before. Somehow we found it so much less amusing in the practical. But it wasn't magical herbs that took my friend. I knew that then and I know that now. I just didn't want to acknowledge it yet. And so Aaron was taken, and the biggest crime of all was that I wasn't.

Life felt different after that, obviously. When someone vanishes from your life, they leave a vacuum. Everything I used to do for fun just made me feel like a bastard for being able to do it. Smoking felt like stealing, sitting around relaxing felt like dereliction of duty, even something as innocuous as going to McDonald's that day felt like a public trial for my crimes against decency and fairness.

Things felt that way because things were wrong; what happened to Aaron was wrong. Not only because it happened to him and ruined his life, and not only because it didn't happen to

me when it had every right to. No, what happened to Aaron was so wrong because, despite how much it effected his loved ones, it was just a drop in a horrible ocean.

According to a study by the American Civil Liberties Union, black individuals were arrested at 3.73 times the rate of white individuals for non-violent marijuana offenses between 2001 and 2010, despite another study done by the same organization concluding that the two ethnic groups use marijuana products at nearly identical rates, with whites actually consuming slightly more.

The same studies concluded that this is likely a result of racial profiling brought on through codified police policy in which the heavy patrolling of known communities of people of color has been a standard for decades, easily since the Reagan administration.

I got arrested that night with my car and its headlights on, by policemen on bicycles wearing polos and shorts, who were in my suburban neighborhood because there had been reports of car break-ins.

Aaron got arrested with his car turned off, parked off the road behind his dark apartment complex, by policeman in an SUV that had “K-9 Unit” stenciled on the back windshield. They didn't tell him why they were in the neighborhood. Both parties already knew.

At the time of his incarceration, Aaron was working as a bagger at his local Smith's. He was promptly fired, and his family felt the loss of the income he had been contributing to help sustain their household. His mother ended up picking up a shit at Walmart to make up for it, which means Aaron's nine-year-old sister was left unattended most evenings until around eight at night, and her grades eventually began to suffer.

Aaron had been going to Green Valley High with me but was promptly expelled. He wouldn't get his diploma for another three years after his release through an adult education

program, having been forced to find another job in construction up until then. It never ceases to amaze me that such simple, seemingly compartmentalized injustice can have such a devastating domino effect.

Aaron was released from Nevada Southern Detention Center on October 9th, 2016. He told that his sentence had been extended several months due to a few citations he'd been issued by the guards during his time in the private penitentiary. When I asked him what the citations were for, he told me the guards said he was being “mouthy”.

He told me that he had been written up for even more petty reasons: complaining about conditions within earshot of a guard, standing too close to the fence for too long, even breaking the rules of game night or talking during movie night. All these extending his sentence very slightly. This compounding

I went with his family to go pick him up. One might think that such a reunion would involve warm, happy embraces and joyous laughter of relief, but it didn't. We were all to aware of how hard things were going to be from then on out. Aaron was now a felon, and that put him into a category of society that no one really wanted to think about, let alone be a part of.

He could no longer vote, apply for any federal funding or grants, own guns, serve on a jury, or travel abroad, that last revocation owed to the drug trafficking charge specifically. But his prohibition from jury duty always irked me the most. That seemed - and seems- to me like the state was deliberately trying to prevent Aaron from possibly stopping the kind of injustice that befell him.

The fact that he couldn't vote anymore seemed more like a principle punishment than a practical one to me at the time. But the more I started to think about it, the more I started to

contextualize it, the more I realized that this mass revocation of rights causes a much more tangible problem than I'd initially thought.

When the loss of voting rights is studied in perspective with racially fueled arrest rates, what you're looking at is the disenfranchisement of a particular ethnic group the likes of which hasn't been seen since the days of southern reconstruction and Jim Crowe.

It's hard to argue against this given the numerical facts of the situation. Indeed, according the Vera institute of Justice, one in thirteen black Americans does not have the right to vote due to past convictions; more than a quarter of disenfranchised convicts in the country being black.

But such simple basic rights were not the only thing taken from my friend, and others like him.

Aaron now had to stamp the ugly and often deal-breaking stain of feloniousness onto every resume and job application, ensuring that finding any employment above entry-level was an exercise in inexcusable difficulty. As a result, Aaron's stayed with the same aforementioned construction company for years, staring as a humble worker and relying on internal promotion for any kind of advancement to his career.

I was having lunch with Aaron sometime last spring, during his thirty-minute break. He was telling me about how he'd been promoted to assistant foreman. His elation and excitement were infectious, and I smiled right along with him

But part of me was thinking about how he used to only get this excited when he was talking to me about his plans to work as a national park ranger. But that was before. National park rangers require at least a bachelor's degree in a relevant field. Aaron's family just afford to send him to college, or even take out bank loans, and the state had made it so he wasn't even

allowed to ask them for financial aid ever again. Park rangers are also preferred to have some police experience. More irony we couldn't seem to laugh at.

Aaron was even denied the one fallback escape route that many directionless young people turn to: the military. Felons can't serve, it's as simple as that, and so Aaron lost the last route to public aid for housing, medicine and education that existed to him.

Aaron had stopped smoking after he got out. At first, he said it was just so he could get a job, but after he did, he didn't start again. I never asked him why. I guess the most magical thing about those herbs to Aaron was how the could eventually cease to be magical at all.

It was like my friend had been thrown off the passenger ship of our country onto a tiny deserted island, left behind with a few others with a shamefully homogenous racial demographic and then told to try and make the best of the consequences of his decisions. Even though he didn't jump off.

And he did. My friend did make the best of the place in which he found himself. Aaron is now an assistant foreman (the equivalent of a low-level manager), as I said, for the Las Vegas Paving Corporation, with health insurance and a matched 401k, more than I can say for myself as a shamefully archetypical liberal-arts major. He's always telling me really just wants to put the whole thing behind him, to forget that it even happened and to move on with his life as best he can. He tells me he doesn't want to be weighed down by the experience.

And emotionally he isn't, or at least he's so good at hiding it that I can't tell, but practically, he is weighed down by it. Heavily. And we both know it. Him saying this was really just another part of the perpetual process of fighting back against that weight.

But I've never been as strong as my friend. I took his incarceration harder than him, and the injustices of his life to come seemed to cut me deeper, though I suspect I was just worse at hiding it.

A numb, heavy guilt settled on me the day he was convicted, it settled like a jacket that was just slightly too tight, one you couldn't justify getting rid of because it technically fit, but one that would never be comfortable. Ever since then I've been trying to shake it off with education and vocalization of these systemic problems, and the jacket has loosened, but it will never fit perfectly. Which is good. It has no right to.

It had no right to because of what that mahogany-skinned man silently said to me that day in the McDonald's. *You have strolled casually through a life through which your friend has been forced to crawl, and there is no excuse, no possible justification for it. Your existence is the relative evil.*

I had nodded gently to myself but said nothing, because he was right, and there was nothing more that could be said.