The Grim Reefer

How weed can take control of your life-a cautionary tale

December 1, 1997 By Stephen Beachy

For the past six months, my home has been a miniature rain forest. My home is not quite a studio-it's a studio without a kitchen that I share with Jonathan in San Francisco's Mission District. Thinking we'd be splitting our time between our city home and our country estate, another studio apartment in Santa Rosa, we blocked off about a third of our 100 or so square feet with sheets of Mylar (that silvery luminescent balloon material). Mylar reflect light, so it's wonderful to surround plants with. Stimulated by a 400-watt growlight-and later the 1,000-watt bloomlight-the space created is a miniature growing room sheathed in a crinkly mirror.

We bought five tiny marijuana clones from the Oakland Cannabis Buyers Club and set up a hydroponics system. You nurture the plants out of "grow rocks" through which a mixture of water and nutrients constantly flows, adding a constant gurgle of water to the bright lights...19 hours a day. It's a difficult environment to get used to, but hey, we'd only be there half the time, right?

I had never successfully grown anything in my life, although I come from a religious farming people in Iowa and Pennsylvania. But the wonderful thing about marijuana, whatever you think of its medicinal and recreational values, is that it grows.

And grows and grows and grows. Living green things are wonderful to have in your home; they add fragrance and oxygen and life. And humidity-one of our windows sealed shut from the thick air. Our drab little abode was transformed into something amazing. I was elated, rejuvenated.

I allowed the experience to become a metaphor for life and transformation, a new stage in which the threat of HIV had been reduced. Winter and the metaphors of death were over and spring was here in a big way.

And then the plants grew some more. Jonathan and I switched the light cycle to 12 hours a day to trick the pot into thinking winter was coming and it was time to start flowering, to start creating those luminous white buds that eventually tight up, turn orange and get smoked.

But light was coming in also in the morning, interrupting their dark cycle, so they went back to vegetative growth. They bulged out of the Mylar curtain, seven feet tall and counting. I had to get down on my knees and crawl to water them.

The Santa Rosa apartment didn't work out, so we stayed in the Mission, and our rain forest, seven days a week. As spring turned toward summer, the room got hotter. Not even constantly running fans and open windows could keep the heat down with that 1,000-watt bulb. But slowly the plants were harvestable. You hang the miniature buds to dry for a few days and manicure them by trimming off the leaf.

Soon our entire apartment was overtaken. Weed growing, baby weed in the closet, weed hanging, weed in storage, weed crumbs on the floor, weed in the bed.

Weed was making me crazy. I was a stoner when I was 19, and I sold weed from my college dorm. But I hadn't smoked much since them, so the beauty of the project was about making something grow. I am not one of those people who feels that pot is necessarily a beautiful, revolutionary thing. Jonathan had been taking AZT and needed to smoke to mellow out the nausea and those sensations of toxicity in the brain, but he had gone off the drug since we started farming.

What had begun as a Zen experience of vegetable communion was becoming a simple irritation. The expense for those lights and pumps and nutrients was significant. Even if we sold out harvest on the street, we wouldn't see much profit. Watering, trimming, harvesting and manicuring takes time.

So I had done the weed thing. I had made it grow. I just wanted my life back.

Finally, as I write, the harvest is in. The plants have been killed and their flowers smoked (only by friends with doctors' notes!) or sold to the Oakland buyers club. Although Oakland is the only city in California to have passed a law allowing cultivation of pot for sale, we live in San Francisco. I'll admit that despite the meager profits, the illegality itself made the money sweeter. We all love to be outlaws in America.

The lights have been turned off, and we have our full 100 square feet to luxuriate in again. The sheets are washed, the floor swept and the air less fragrant, less green, less oxygenated. Nothing left but the memories, and maybe a half-ounce or so of our best buds-but only for any possible future medical needs.

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