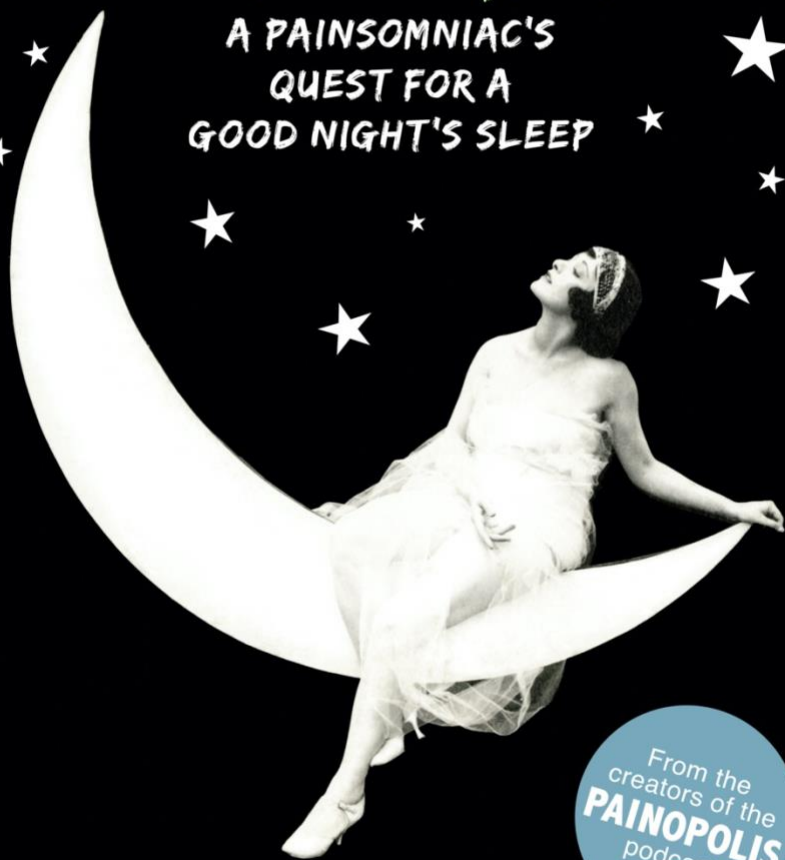


CANNABIS LULLABY

A PAIN SOMNIAC'S
QUEST FOR A
GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP



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Cannabis Lullaby

*A Painsomniac's Quest for
a Good Night's Sleep*

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Cannabis Lullaby

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Clueless About Cannabis

WHEN IT CAME TO marijuana, I'd been a Boy Scout my whole life. Did I say Boy Scout? I meant *Cub* Scout. Until my mid-40s, the only leafy plant material I consumed recreationally was Earl Grey tea. Other than an occasional beer with pizza or a glass of wine with pasta, I never went near an intoxicant of any sort.

Then came chronic pain combined with chronic insomnia. Pummeled by that one-two punch, I was so desperate for a good night's sleep I was willing to try anything. A friend of a friend obliged by offering me a one-time-only gift of marijuana. Having already sampled other options without success, I said yes.

I expected her to pass me a baggie stuffed with smokable weed. Instead I received a paper sack containing three ordinary-looking brownies. Undaunted by their skunky aroma, I ate one that night. (Big mistake: I should have started out with a quarter of a brownie at most.)

An hour later while watching television, I saw a car commercial so hilarious it made me keel over with nonstop laughter. I'm talking massive, refreshing, furniture-shaking, belly-quivering guffaws. Followed by another round of laughter. It was the most uproarious thing I'd ever seen.

"What's so funny about that car commercial?" my wife asked, looking baffled.

My answer: "Hell if I know."

After eating that brownie, I felt as contented and silly as a glassy-eyed cat munching on catnip. I was having the time of my life. The world suddenly seemed transcendently radiant and welcoming, as if I were viewing it from the soothing vantage point of a gurgling Jacuzzi on the deck of a posh cruise ship. My body—normally gripped by far too much muscle tension—morphed into a bowl of laid-back Jell-O. I stayed in that beatific state for the next hour and then headed to bed. I sank into a deep, dreamless sleep and remained that way for nine and a half hours.

Oh my God. Nine and a half hours.

I hadn't slept that long in *years*. That was nearly five hours more than usual, and the extra slumber made all the difference. After waking up the next morning, I felt rejuvenated and ready to take on the world. I also felt optimistic and proactive about—well, about everything. But not because I was still three sheets to the wind. The high had worn off by the time I climbed out of bed.

My newfound zest and enthusiasm were the polar opposite of my usual morning attitude: exhausted, grouchy, and caught in the

purgatory between wanting to roll back into bed and knowing there would be no point. I'd just stare at the ceiling anyway.

I realized that the irritability, pessimism, and curmudgeonly outlook I'd been experiencing for God-knows-how-long wasn't the result of stress, overwork, depression, chronic pain, or a miserly worldview springing from my gnarled soul. No, I'd been a grump and grumbler from lack of sleep. One night's rest was all it took to replenish me. Achieving that metamorphosis required nothing more than the simple act of eating a brownie.

My wife took one glance at me that morning at the breakfast table and said, "David, you look so refreshed!"

Damn, was the effect that obvious? Apparently so. I certainly *felt* refreshed. Remarkably, because of my painsomnia, I'd forgotten what it felt like to wake up revitalized.

This was my eureka moment.

Without question, cannabis had worked better than any other bedtime strategy I'd tried. After years of morale-destroying sleep deprivation, I was uncharacteristically starting off my day with a perky outlook on life.

But wait, was I jumping to conclusions? Was cannabis really responsible for producing that prolonged sleep? Or could it have been a fluke?

There was only one way to find out: later that evening, I ate another brownie and once again dozed off as smoothly as if a choir of cherubim had sung me a lullaby. The following night, I repeated the experiment and got the same result. Victory! Each time, I slipped

into a state of unconsciousness so restorative I'd liken it to a level of hibernation only a snow-dusted black bear in the fetal position could match.

But what about the wacky, laughter-filled high that clobbered me that first night? It returned on those subsequent nights as well, and I loved it. As delightfully distracting as a riotous visit from the Three Stooges, the upwelling of hilarity gave me a well-deserved mini-vacation from my pelvic achiness. Pot not only ushered me into a deep sleep; it showed me a fun time en route.

I also appreciated that the high produced by cannabis differed from the intoxication triggered by alcohol. Unlike liquor, which makes me feel depressed, cannabis made me feel carefree, tranquil, and imaginative.

As I would later discover, the particular type of cannabis I use—as well as the amount—plays a big role in determining the mental and physical effects I experience from it. Through trial and error, I would eventually catch on that some strains can knock me out like a carnival mallet, while others can worsen my insomnia by making me hyperalert. What's more, taking too much of either variety can cause me to feel temporarily morbid and hopeless.

But during those first attempts, I had hit the bull's-eye. Cannabis made me restful, giddy, hungry, meditative, charmingly absent-minded, and euphoric all at the same time. It also turned my usual nightly pelvic discomfort into inconsequential background noise. Pot even dialed down my urinary urgency, allowing me to forgo some of my usual middle-of-the-night sorties to the toilet.

Problem solved? More like, problem just beginning. True, I'd awakened to the undeniable revelation that cannabis gave me a magnificent night's sleep. But once I had established for myself that weed was a godsend for my painsomnia, I had to confront a big, obvious dilemma: I'd eaten all the brownies. Now what?

The friend of a friend who'd baked them for me wasn't interested in being my regular supplier. So I couldn't go back to her, bowl in hand *Oliver Twist*-style, and say, "More, please." Given the clandestine nature of that gift, I never even met or spoke with the person who sent it. I didn't even know her name.

Having received those brownies in a roundabout manner, I also never found out how they were made, what kind of cannabis was in them, or where I could get more. This was all happening prior to the current cannabis-friendly era, when every neighborhood in my city has at least one pot shop. Instead, the weed world back then was secretive.

Finding cannabis didn't seem to be a problem for anybody else. But I was coming into this topic as virginal as a neutered dachshund, clueless about cannabis and the people who grew and sold it. I was whirring with questions you just didn't bring up in polite society. For instance:

- Is there just one type of cannabis? Or is it like buying tulip bulbs at the garden center, where you have to decide among countless different varieties? (Short answer: the latter.)
- Where and how do I buy pot without ending up in court?
- How much should I buy?

- How much does it cost?

- How exactly should I use cannabis once I've purchased it? Should I smoke it? And if so, how? Or do I bake it in a brownie? And if so, again, how? I've never even whipped up *regular* brownies before. How am I going to make brownies loaded with cannabis?

Not unlike when Fred MacMurray invented flubber,¹ I had discovered a remarkable substance that might pose unknown risks. To complicate matters further, I had no idea how to maximize its usefulness or limit any untoward side effects. I wasn't even familiar with what those side effects might be.

I was at the start of a mysterious and intimidating learning curve.

Nowadays, in jurisdictions where cannabis is legal (at least at the state level), finding a store that sells pot is a simple matter of looking on Yelp. Cities such as Seattle, Portland, Denver, and points beyond are erupting with pot stores that make cannabis almost as easy to purchase as a bag of Doritos.

But that wasn't the case when I first tried it to relieve my chronic pain and sleeping difficulties. In those days, in Oregon where I lived, the state allowed people with certain ailments to use pot for medical reasons. But the law left unaddressed this thorny question: where do you get it?

All the people I knew from high school who had the homing instincts of a carrier pigeon when it came to finding marijuana were long gone from my life. Lots of furtive horticulturists in my community were growing pot in their basements and upstairs bedrooms. But those folks didn't advertise. They did their best to

keep as low a profile as possible.

Who else could advise me about this murky realm — my pothead friends? I didn't have any.

Family? Not a chance. Among my relatives, the preferred weed had always been tobacco, not cannabis—which explains why many of my older family members aren't around anymore. They keeled over from puffing cancer sticks in an era when it was still socially acceptable to chain smoke in a car with the windows rolled up and a row of grade-schoolers turning green from nicotine toxicity in the back seat. But there I go waxing nostalgic.

I had nobody to help me figure out the ins and outs of cannabis; so I had to rely on my own researching skills gained during an eventful career as a journalist. I tackled the topic as if it were a magazine assignment. Going straight to the horse's mouth, I sought advice from an array of lifelong pot smokers and growers. These were people who lived and breathed marijuana. I also dug deep into the medical literature on cannabis, insomnia, and chronic pain to learn what's known scientifically about how they interact. And George Plimpton-style, I became a participatory journalist of sorts by using my body as a testing site to sample different types of pot and different ways of consuming it.

Ultimately, I tracked down lots of invaluable insights, and I've been using cannabis to combat painsomnia for 15 years. Am I still getting the same luxuriant slumber I achieved in the beginning? Not exactly. During that time, my hours of sleep gradually dropped from nine and a half to about seven and a half hours per night. Of course,

I'm now 15 years older; so age might play some role in that.

And no doubt, I've developed more of a tolerance to pot, so it doesn't pack quite as much of a sleep-inducing haymaker as it did at first. But it still helps tremendously. Thanks to cannabis, I'm snoozing solidly through the night and feeling recharged after waking up the next morning. Without pot, my sleep becomes so fitful and truncated I soon transform back into a depleted zombie.

But here's the amazing part: that two-hour reduction might work in my favor. Despite the popular belief that eight hours of shuteye per night is the ideal amount we should all be aiming for, a major study published in the *Archives of General Psychiatry* said otherwise.² Using survey data from more than one million Americans aged 30 to 102, researchers compared the participants' time in bed with their survival rates during the next six years. When tallied, the lowest mortality rate was associated with seven hours of sleep per night, not eight. The more that people overshot or undershot seven hours, the likelier they were to croak ahead of schedule.

Even at just eight and a half hours per night, according to that study, there was more than a 15 percent greater chance of dying prematurely,³ as well as a heightened risk of hypertension, coronary artery disease, diabetes, and stroke.⁴ That tendency held true even after researchers controlled for medication use, health status, depression, and sleep apnea.⁵ The death rate also climbed for folks who slept too little, and for those who used sleeping pills.⁶ (Of course, the reliability of this conclusion hinges on whether people can accurately recall their sleeping habits. Many insomniacs are

notoriously bad at that.⁷)

That's not even the biggest surprise I came across while exploring the crossroads of cannabis, sleep, and pain. In the subsequent pages of this book, I'll describe what I've learned about this idiosyncratic plant and disclose all the secrets I wish I'd known before embarking on my journey into the wild world of weed. These insights have saved me lots of money, time, and frustration.

In the next chapter, I'll explain how I solved the first and most shadowy leg of my cannabis odyssey: finding someone who could sell me weed (preferably, without either of us going to jail). Prior to entering the domain of pot dealers and grow operations, I figured seeking a supplier would be challenging, if not dangerous. I envisioned myself swapping cash for stash in some dimly lit back alley littered with hypodermic needles and winos.

Instead, I was soon hobnobbing—and indeed, sharing the most intimate medical details of my life—with a succession of nonconformist herbalists straight out of a *Portlandia* episode. Picture the love child of Tommy Chong and Florence Nightingale, and you'll have some slight hint of what my newfound acquaintances would be like.

Sources

CHAPTER 5: Clueless About Cannabis

¹ If you're younger than a baby boomer, make that Robin Williams.

² Daniel F. Kripke et al. "Mortality Associated with Sleep Duration and Insomnia," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 59 (2002) doi: 10.1001/archpsyc.59.2.131; Gregg D. Jacobs, *Say Good Night to Insomnia*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2009); Christopher E. Kline et al. "Self-Reported Long Sleep in Older Adults Is Closely Related to Objective Time in Bed," *Sleep and Biological Rhythms* 8, 1 (2010) doi: 10.1111/j.1479-8425.2009.00422.x.

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Author's Bio

DAVID SHARP IS AN award-winning journalist and author based in Portland, Oregon. He's a co-host and editor of [Painopolis](#), a podcast for people with chronic pain.

His career includes 10 years as a contributing editor at *Health* and *Hippocrates* magazines. He's worked on the editorial staffs of *Consumer Reports on Health* and *Health Digest*. His magazine articles have appeared in many national and regional publications, including *Sports Illustrated*, *Eating Well*, *Redbook*, *Cooking Light*, *Bicycling*, *Reader's Digest*, *Special Reports*, *Via*, *Oregon Home*, *McCall's*, *Disney Adventures*, *Women's Sports & Fitness*, *Publishers Weekly*, *USA Today*, and *USA Weekend*. He's also a co-author of the book, *Six Months Off: How to Plan, Negotiate, and Take the Break You Need Without Burning Bridges or Going Broke* (Henry Holt).

Hear him recount his chronic pain odyssey in the following two *Painopolis* episodes:

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