

Chapter Five

Water Pipes

The Big Bong Theory

First made of bamboo in Thailand, the water pipe had for centuries been traditionally used for tobacco. A distinct type of water pipe, the hookah of the Middle East, also moonlighted for hashish. In North America, smokers nowadays use water pipes primarily for cannabis. Some models are compact and portable, while most are designed for tabletops. Some models are made of silicone or ceramic, while most are made with bowls of glass or metal, and with bodies of fragile glass or durable acrylic. The two ingredients that all models share are cannabis and water.

ODE TO YOUTH

Glass bodies have morphed into ornate and sculptural designs whose creation has elevated the craft into an artform. Any dubious reputation that straight society may have cast upon this sculptural artform is due to their use almost exclusively for cannabis. In stoner lingo, the ornate tabletop model is cherished as a “bong,” while the pocket-size model is nicknamed a “bubbler.” When smoke shops sold bongs and bubblers during prohibition, they could endorse their use for tobacco only. Perhaps in whispers and under wraps, they called them “bongs.” (Hush, hush.) When reverting to abiding by state laws and store policy, shopkeepers called them “water pipes.” (Wink, wink.)

As accoutrements of cannabis culture, the bong and bubbler might evoke an image of a laidback teenager sporting a 420-logo embroidered on his backward-donned baseball cap or emblazoned on her rainbow-colored tie-dyed tee-shirt. As a teenager, you might have been one such starry-bloodshot-eyed stoner. Even if your parents were aging hippies who voiced tolerance of your youthful drug use, prudence may have dictated that you conceal your use and hide your stash anyway. Part of your hidden treasures probably included a pack of rolling papers or a pocket-sized pipe. Unless your bedroom or basement had drop-down ceilings, water pipes were too big and bulky to conceal, so its possession remained off limits to you. Upon leaving home and moving into your first pad or settling into your first-year college-student dorm room, your rite of passage may have included the purchase of your first bong—oops, of your first water pipe.

WATER PIPES ARE COOL

In addition to granting you bragging rights among your friends, your new bong enabled you to indulge in some late nights of serious smoking, because, oh joy, now you were being kind to your lungs. Just hearing the bubbling sound calmed your sense of mental well-being. And when you were done, pouring the chamber's clouded water down the drain comforted your state of physical health. When you smelled the stink, you were thankful that the stink was in your sink and not in your lungs. Gosh, you thought, that was stinky enough to make you never want to smoke again, or anyway never smoke with anything other than your trusty bong. With its use, you were certain you were doing your lungs a big favor by cooling and moistening the smoke—or so you believed.

Your assumptions were only partially correct. Yes, water pipes do cool the otherwise hot and scratchy smoke. But contrary to most young smokers' expectations, water pipes do not moisten it. Hot and dry, smoke desiccates and irritates your mouth and throat, which makes you more susceptible to colds and flu. The parched air of indoor heating, which dries out your nasal passage and mouth and throat, contributes to the higher incidence of such diseases in winter. To counteract the arid air, room humidifiers add water vapor into the air. While it is reassuring