

The tabs kicked in somewhere between the thrift store and the honky-tonk, right as Jake was trying on a ten-gallon hat that looked like it had survived the actual Wild West. The fluorescent lights started breathing, and suddenly his idea didn't seem ridiculous anymore—it seemed *essential*.

"We're method actors now," he declared, adjusting his bolo tie with the seriousness of a man accepting a Nobel Prize. "Tonight, we *are* cowboys."

I nodded sagely, my pupils the size of dinner plates. "Partner, I've never felt more yeehaw in my entire life."

The Broken Spoke was already thumping with fiddle music when we swaggered through the doors, spurs jangling (where did we even GET spurs?). The acid had us walking like we'd been riding horses for days, which apparently was exactly the right amount of bowlegged confidence for line dancing night.

"Evenin', ma'am," Jake tipped his hat to a group of women in matching "Bride Tribe" shirts. His drawl was somewhere between Texas and a bad Matthew McConaughey impression, but the acid made it feel authentic as leather.

What happened next was a blur of boot-scooting that would've made our ancestors proud—if our ancestors had been cowboys, which they definitely weren't. We two-stepped, we cotton-eyed-joe'd, we did moves that probably weren't real but felt divinely choreographed by the honky-tonk gods themselves.

The problem started when we got *too* good.

"Y'all must be professionals!" A woman in rhinestone boots grabbed my arm during the Electric Slide. "Where's your ranch?"

"Oh, uh..." The acid made lying impossible. My brain was a disco ball of truth. "The ranch is... in my mind?"

Jake was cornered by the Bride Tribe, who were convinced he was a rodeo champion. He was deep into a story about breaking wild mustangs when I saw the panic in his eyes—the universal look of someone realizing they're in too deep while also being too high to navigate out.

"BATHROOM MEETING!" I shouted, grabbing him. "COWBOY EMERGENCY!"

We stumbled into the men's room, and the door swung shut, muffling the fiddle music into a distant pulse. The fluorescent light above the mirror didn't just flicker; it began to hum a low, resonant frequency that vibrated in our teeth. The porcelain of the sinks started to ripple, like heat haze on a long highway.

Jake stared at our reflections, but our faces were starting to melt and run together. "Dude," he whispered, his voice trembling, "the mirror... it's getting... loud."

He was right. The mirror wasn't reflecting anymore; it was projecting. The silver surface swirled into a vortex of deep purple and shimmering gold, a silent, cosmic whirlpool. Without a word, guided by a logic that only made sense in that moment, we reached out and touched the glass. It wasn't solid. It was like dipping our hands into cool, electric water. We took a step forward and through.

We weren't in the bathroom anymore. We were sitting on a celestial back porch, rocking in creaky wooden chairs that overlooked a nebula of swirling stars. The air smelled like ozone and fresh laundry. Sitting in a third rocking chair between us was a man in a simple white tunic, but he was wearing a flannel shirt over it, unbuttoned. He had a kind, bearded face and was expertly rolling a joint.

"Hey, fellas," he said, his voice calm and familiar. "Knew you'd be dropping by. You looked like you needed a break."

My brain, the disco ball of truth, supplied the answer. "Jesus?"

He chuckled, licking the rolling paper. "You can call me JC. Or Jess. Whatever works. You want

a hit of this? It's divine."

He lit the joint with a snap of his fingers and passed it to Jake. Jake, to his credit, took it without hesitation. "We have a problem, JC," Jake said after a long, thoughtful drag. "A moral quandary."

"I know," Jesus said, gesturing with his chin for Jake to pass the joint to me. "The cowboy thing. Appropriation versus appreciation. It's a classic."

I took a hit. The smoke tasted like honey and forgotten memories. "So... are we bad people?" Jesus took the joint back, took a long, slow pull, and blew a perfect smoke ring that turned into a tiny, shimmering halo before fading into the starfield. "Are you trying to hurt anyone?"

"No," we said in unison.

"Are you having a good time?"

"Yes," we said, a little more sheepishly.

"Is the music good?"

"It's pretty good, yeah."

He leaned forward, a cosmic twinkle in his eye. "Look, life is a costume party, boys. Everyone's trying on different hats. Some are ten-gallon, some are crowns of thorns. The trick isn't to worry about which hat you're wearing, but to make sure you dance while you've got it on. The universe is a honky-tonk, not a courtroom. Now, I think those ladies are waiting for you."

He stood up, and as he did, the porch, the stars, and his flannel shirt all dissolved. The smell of ozone was replaced by industrial-strength urinal cakes. We were standing back in the men's room, staring at our own, solid reflections in the mirror. The fluorescent light just flickered, normally.

We stared at each other, pupils like black holes, having a shared, holy, and utterly insane existential resolution.

"Dude," Jake said, his voice full of reverence. "Did we...?"

"We did," I confirmed. "And Jesus thinks we should dance."

The guilt was gone, replaced by a sense of profound, cosmic permission. We slunk back out, found the Bride Tribe, and Jake cleared his throat.

"Ladies, I have a confession. We're not real cowboys. We're just two guys who took acid and thought this would be fun and—"

"Oh honey, we KNOW," the bride-to-be laughed. "Half the people here are accountants from downtown. You think Chad over there really ropes cattle?" She pointed to a guy in designer boots doing the Cupid Shuffle.

The relief was physical. The moral weight lifted like a ten-gallon hat off a sweaty head.

We danced three more songs out of pure, divinely-sanctioned joy before Irish-goodbye-ing out the back, stumbling into the night with our spurs catching on everything. The Uber driver didn't even blink at two cosmically-realigned cowboys piling into his Corolla.

Back at the apartment, we cranked up some Dolly Parton, uncorked whatever wine was closest, and line danced in the living room until our neighbor banged on the floor. The morning found us passed out in full cowboy regalia, boots still on, surrounded by empty bottles and what appeared to be a lasso made from iPhone chargers.

"Never again," Jake groaned, his hat covering his face.

"Never again," I agreed.

But we both kept the hats.