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American Stoner

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AMERICAN STONER

By

Kelly Carter

THESIS

Submitted to
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ABSTRACT

AMERICAN STONER

By

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This narrative explores the issue of medical marijuana patients who are also parents and how their medical choices impact the lives of their children in a society that still maintains conflicting views on the legality and moral rightness of marijuana use. Presently, people who are allowed to legally use marijuana as medication are facing the potential and real loss of custody of their children to children protective services. This narrative explores one family's experience with the conflict between medical marijuana and child protective services.

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Kelly Carter

2013

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INTRODUCTION

Over 102 million Americans, 41 percent of the U.S. population, has used marijuana in their lifetime. Currently, nineteen states have legalized marijuana for medical use, and two have legalized it for recreational use. Despite these statistics and changing cultural and political sentiments, marijuana's depiction in contemporary narratives continues to be largely limited to criminal or humorous portrayals. Movies, television, music and literature tend to portray marijuana users as hardened drug dealers clandestinely pushing their wares, ultimately ending up in prison, and laughable goof-offs who accomplish nothing.

My thesis started with these ideas and the goal of expanding the contemporary portrayal of marijuana use in American society to reflect a more accurate account of who the American stoner really is through a collection of short stories exploring a diverse assortment of users and their life situations. Through my readings I found that my assumption was fairly accurate. A majority of marijuana portrayals in literature still rely on the criminal and humorous stereotypes as they recount close calls with the law and times when the law won, such as many of the stories found in Paul Krassner's collection Pot Stories for the Soul: An Updated Edition for a Stoned America. Others focus on adventures in growing such as T.C. Boyle's Budding Prospects: A Pastoral which, while engaging, lacked the same eye-opening appeal of Tortilla Curtain.

A small selection of works though are working towards the same goal I started with and provide a far more expanded definition of what it means to use marijuana in America. Michael Konik's Reefer Gladness: Stories, Essays, and Riffs on Marijuana explores much of the non-medical benefits of marijuana such as its ability to slow down time for the mortality obsessed or how it "loosens the memory and creates powerful associations that" (Konik, Ch. 1, ¶ 22) the character, a writer, could not normally make. Many of the characters in Konik's stories are intelligent, productive members of society who have achieved academic and career successes all while under the influence of cannabis.

Dan Shapiro's memoir of his battle with cancer, Mom's Marijuana: Life, Love, and Beating the Odds, provided a presentation of marijuana use in a family atmosphere which while humorous was also touching and allowed for surprises such as his mother's abrupt turn about in her opinion on growing marijuana which leads her to planting a crop of marijuana in her backyard after seeing the poor quality of medication her son brings home for such a high price.

Matt Frank's Pot Farm offered interesting insight to the workings of a medical marijuana farm and the medical and non-medical users who work there. More interestingly though, Pot Farm illuminated the self-consciousness in which we speak of marijuana. In the opening chapter he warns the reader "I have made myself an unreliable narrator," and through out the story shows concerns about questions of validity regarding his experience since he was taking notes under the influence of marijuana. This is an easy stumbling point in literature and conversations about marijuana. How seriously can the audience take an author

knowing they were possibly stoned when writing or when the events they are writing about took place?

To augment my fictional readings with more journalistic sources, I turned to internet research. My investigation into the subject of marijuana brought me a wide variety of topics and perspectives – forums detailing first-use experiences and hotly debating the pro and cons of legalization, how-to guides on guerilla and in-house growing, websites detailing the medical uses of marijuana (a topic growing rapidly each day as new studies are published with an almost unbelievable growing list of medical applications including a cure for cancer), numerous cannabis commerce and strain sites supporting the idea that many stoners are connoisseurs, or “bud sommeliers” as Michael Konik refers to them. I also subscribed to several social media pages which supplied with me a constant daily stream of news articles detailing topics such as medical marijuana news, marijuana prohibition, and the disturbing statistics of how much money is spent incarcerating people on marijuana related charges.

Of this daily stream of cannabis information, some of the most disturbing stories were of children taken from their parents due to marijuana use. In November 2012, Texas two-year-old Alexandra Hill was removed from her parents' custody and placed into foster care because her parents admitted to smoking pot after their child had gone to bed. She remained in foster care until August 2013 when she was rushed to the hospital with severe brain trauma resulting from abuse inflicted by her foster parents. While this may seem like a tragic failing of the foster care system, further research showed numerous stories

of children being taken from their parents for marijuana use, many of these cases found in states that have legalized medical use.

In my research I found dozens of stories of medical marijuana patients and legalization advocates losing custody of their children due to their marijuana use. While in Texas marijuana remains soundly illegal, this strange and seemingly unfair loophole exists in many of the medical marijuana states. Given the air of changing perspectives on marijuana and the steady progress of legalization, both medical and recreational, the issue of parents, children, and marijuana seemed to be one worth exploring.

It is from this point that I shifted my intentions for my thesis from a collection of stories exploring a diverse portrayal of marijuana users to the singular experience of a medical marijuana patient's family. Now that marijuana isn't quite the drug boogiemer it used to be (D.A.R.E. has dropped it from its anti-drug curriculum as of early 2013) the issue of marijuana and children is likely lead to many debates and problems. Unlike alcohol, which can clearly be labeled an adult substance with no medicinal properties, children now have parents, grandparents, even siblings who use marijuana for medicinal purposes. At the same time many will be exposed to those who use it recreationally as several states have legalized it for that purpose. More pertinent to my writing though is how protective social service agencies will deal with an issue that is very much in a grey area.

My thesis story centers on 14-year-old Allison Couri who is taken, along with her younger siblings, by protective services and placed into foster care due

to their father's use of marijuana for medical purposes just before the 2008 of medical marijuana legalization in Michigan. In Allison's household, marijuana is the only thing that stops her father's seizures, but it is a secret that she and her siblings are cautioned not to talk about. When her parents are arrested, Allison must deal with the social stigma of her father's marijuana use and the decision of if she should speak openly about it.

To further my understanding of children and marijuana, I spoke with people who grew up with parents who openly smoked and grew marijuana long before it was legalized in anyway. Scenes of Allison assisting her father in the garden and terms such as "special tobacco" came from these interviews. To assist myself in creating a young adult character, I augmented my reading list to include several young adult titles including The Secret Life of Bees by Sue Kidd Monk, Monster by Walter Dean Myers, and Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson.

Of these, Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson provided the most insight into writing from a teenage girl's perspective and how they process the world around them. While the novel's protagonist, Melinda, deals with the very personal trauma of rape versus Allison's dilemma of social opinion, the idea of encouraging communication skills in teenage girls is one that is worth exploring in multiple ways as it manifests in reality all too often. As a parent of a teenage girl, I understand all too well how little they share of what they should share and how setting forth examples, such a narratives that address the issue of communication, are a valuable tool for creating health communication skills.

All three of the young adult novels I read for my thesis feature teenaged characters holding secrets that they must struggle to share by the novel's end. While Allison's secret is made an open one by virtue of her parent's arrest, she still must struggle with the decision to let assumptions remain, both those about her and her family and her own about others, or to speak openly about her family situation and what she knows about marijuana.

In dealing with the subject of marijuana and children, both fictionally and in reality, education and communication can be the key to finding solutions to the imbalance created in society by being both a medical marijuana patient and a parent.

Living off the Grid

The house is full of sticky sweet steam from freshly made strawberry jam. It's a perfect day to invite Lacey over, there's no weed smell.

"Mom, can Lacey come over today?"

"Not today, maybe on the weekend." She ladles spoonfuls of thick strawberry jam into mason jars.

"But next weekend is Halloween."

"That sounds perfect. Maybe she can go with you, Travis and Hailey."

"Yeah, right, I'm sure she'll want to hang out with kids on Halloween."

"Why not? Doesn't she have siblings?"

"I don't know. Why can't she come over today?"

"Because it's Monday and your dad's friends are coming over," she says, wiping her brow with the back of her hand.

"We'll stay upstairs."

"No. We discussed this before you started school. Go see if there's more jars in the pantry. We had a bigger yield this year."

My mother loves canning food. She plants a huge garden every summer and cans every fall, selling off the extra stuff with hand-painted labels at the local food co-op. She thinks store foods have too many unpronounceable things in

them. It's food, not chemistry. And eating high fructose corn syrup is like shooting sugar right into your veins. Dad stashes chips and munchies in the grow room. Mom pretends not to notice them. Under the shelves of canned vegetables and fruits is another box of empty jars. I yank it out and head back into the kitchen, formulating a compromise.

“Can't Dad have his friends over tomorrow? I'll clean up the living room.”

I put the box down on the counter and poke at the pot of jam with the ladle.

“Nope, there's still a lot to do with elections coming next week. Can't your friend come over tomorrow?”

“No, she has drama practice.”

I wander into the living room. Hailey is lying on the old braided rug and coloring in a notebook. The kid is always coloring. Mom has to hide the crayons when its time for her lessons or she colors all over the worksheets.

“Is that one of Travis' notebooks?”

She shakes her head no, but I know it is. I step over her, flop on the couch and flick on the television. Election news is on. I'm sick of hearing about the election. No one in my house cares who wins the presidential race as long as Proposal 1 passes and legalizes Dad's medication.

Marijuana is the only medicine that controls Dad's seizures. Every few weeks he has friends over. Friends like Mrs. Swanson, who has some sort of cancer, Mr. Nieminsky, whose stomach always hurts, and Jimmer, (no mister, just Jimmer please) who was in Iraq and still has nightmares. Dad says pot helps

keep Jimmer's demons at bay. There are others, but when they come over us kids are shoed upstairs. Sometimes Aunt Susie and Uncle Rick bring our cousins, Bradley and Angela. Cousins are the only kids we hang out with. It's one of the things that suck about being homeschooled.

My mother doesn't like public school education any more then she likes mass-produced food. She doesn't want us to soak up the ideas packed in between learning science and math. But she does let us watch TV. Doesn't TV have just as many stupid ideas like cooking meth to pay for medical bills? Or getting smashed and competing with a bunch of other drunken tramps for an over-the-hill rock star?

In winter our house is the quietest place in the world so we watch a lot of TV and hang out with cousins. Aunt Susie isn't really our aunt, just Mom's closest friend, but it's pretty much the same thing.

"Man, you're so lucky to get to stay home. School sucks," Bradley told me once when they were visiting on a snow day.

"What's so sucky about it?"

"Teachers, the other kids, everything," he said. "There's always someone telling you what to do, or bothering you, and you have to sit there all day. It'd be awesome to just sit home and watch TV and stuff."

"At least you get to hang out with other kids."

"Yeah, but it's still a drag."

I didn't think it sounded like a drag. At school you got to make friends and see them everyday. They got pizza for lunch, field trips and passed out

Valentines on Valentine's Day, a holiday my parents completely ignore. Other girls my age had friends and slumber parties and stuff I see on TV. I wasn't even allowed to have a cell phone.

Two years ago, I began my campaign to go to public school. I tried every way I could to convince my parents to let me go. I threw fits, presented my mom with pro and cons (heavy on the pros), and asked for it on Christmas, my birthday, and even Easter. Finally Mom relented. I started freshman year at a public high school two months ago. But what's the point if I can't have friends over?

The front door lets in a blast of icy cold fall air. Travis rushes through it, dumping a pile of kindling next to the wood stove.

"Close the door stupid. It's cold" I pull the quilt down from the back of the couch.

"Is Mom making pie?" He shucks off his coat and tosses it on Dad's chair.

"No. She's making jam. Close the door."

He sticks his tongue out at me, closes the door and kicks off his shoes, "Hey! That's mine!" Travis yanks the notebook away from Hailey. "Mom! Hailey colored in my notebook!"

"Just tear out the pages," Mom calls back from the kitchen. "And get the fire started."

Travis tears out the sheets she's colored on and a few more. He drops them on the floor in front of her and then goes to the wood stove separating the living room and dining room. Our house used to be my grandparents' camp, but

they gave it to Mom and Dad when I was two. Dad insulated the walls, added solar panels, indoor plumbing, and a greenhouse. My parents call it “living off the grid”. I call it “living off the planet”.

Everything Happens on a Tuesday

Mom's brother, Uncle Joe, says everything happens on a Tuesday. Good or bad, it will be on a Tuesday. I wake on the Tuesday before Halloween to loud bangs and voices harsh as dog barks. Hailey is a blur, catapulting into my bed and burrowing under the blanket.

A man appears in the doorway shining a flashlight in my face and I'm awake, a scream caught in my throat. Hailey trembles next to me like a rich chick's accessory dog. The man flicks on the bedroom light. I see his gun and uniform as he turns and yells down the hallway.

"Kids! All clear!" He disappears into my brother's room. I'm trying to disentangle myself from the blankets and Hailey when another officer appears. He doesn't have his gun out, but it's holstered at his side.

"Everything's okay. I'm Officer Cavendish." He's trying to smile and sound friendly.

He steps in the room and Hailey grips me tight, burying her head into my side.

"Let's get you girls outside where it's safe."

I scramble out of bed and pick up Hailey. Her arms grip my neck like a boa constrictor. Officer Friendly motions like he would take her from me and I shake

my head no. He places a light hand on the back of my shoulder and guides us out of the room. My shoulders twitch with the urge to shake him off. Once in the hall I move fast, bare feet quick against the cool wood of the steps.

In the living room my parents sit on the couch in handcuffs as the police go through our stuff. A German shepherd sniffs everything. Another officer comes out of the pantry holding a box filled with the mason jars Mom uses to store Dads medications. It all finally clicks and makes sense. They're arresting my parents for pot and it all finally clicks.

They are arresting my parents for pot.

My saliva becomes super glue. Our parents told us if the cops ever came we were to say nothing. Not one word.

Another officer comes downstairs with my brother in front of him. Travis is giving his owl face and gnawing his lower lip, biting it so hard I'm worried it'll bleed. I want to reach over to the basket my mother keeps by her recliner and hand him a chap stick, but my feet are as stuck as my lips.

A light hand on my shoulder gets me moving again. They escort us outside and put us in the back of a police cruiser. Our breath comes out like ghosts and fogs the windows as they walk Mom and Dad to another police cruiser.

"Are Mom and Dad going to jail?" Travis asks in a whisper.

"Hush," I say, stroking Hailey's hair like Mom does.

"What's gonna happen to us?"

"I don't know."

A woman with mousy brown hair cut in a bowl shape circa 1982 appears at the car window. She opens the door. "Are you Allison?"

I nod.

"I'm Patricia Welks. I'm a social worker. Let's go into the house and get some clothes for you and your siblings, okay?"

I don't want to go anywhere with this woman. I'm afraid they'll drive off with Hailey and Travis if I get out of the car. The social worker stands there, letting the icy air into the car until I disentangle myself from Hailey.

She starts to wail, "Want Mom!"

I look over at the other police car and know from Mom's face she can hear.

I smooth Hailey's hair over the sides of her head with my palms, whispering. "Its okay Hailey, go see Travis, I gotta get some clothes for us. Your feet are freezin'."

I had slipped on my shoes as they pushed us out of the house, but Hailey is barefoot. Travis has his puffy snow boots. He puts his thin arms around her and she twists and glues to him.

"Where are we going?"

The cops bring out boxes of Dad's indoor growing equipment. How did they get through the heavy deadbolts on the storeroom door? Did they ask for the key or just break it down?

“We’ll arrange for a temporary home for you and your siblings,” the social worker says, “but first we have to go to my office. Try to pack a week’s worth of clothing and anything you need for school.”

I hear the cops in my parents’ bedroom tossing things and searching. A week? School? How could I deal with school now?

“My brother and sister are homeschooled.”

She hesitates at this, uncertain. “Just take what you all need.”

I grab our backpacks and stuff in a week’s worth of clothes for Hailey, trying to make sure I grab her favorites and all her underwear in case she wets the bed. I throw in color books, crayons and the stuffed elephant Dad brought back from a trip downstate last year.

Ms. Bowl-hair remains in the doorway when I get dressed, so I put my back to her and slip on my jeans. Gooseflesh ripples up my bare back as I pull off my nightgown and throw on a baggy sweatshirt. My whole face feels sunburned. No way am I going to put on a bra in front of her. Along with my clothes I pack my journal, iPod, scissors, glue sticks and the folder of clippings that I haven’t used yet.

I hand her Hailey’s backpack and sling mine over one shoulder. In Travis’ room I toss in three chap sticks, clothes, and four Piers Anthony books into his bag, not knowing if they’re the ones he’s read. I turn around to see the woman going through Hailey’s backpack.

“I have to make sure you’re not bringing anything you shouldn’t.” I toss her the other bags and march to the stairs.

“It’s for your own safety, Allie.”

Downstairs she sets all three overnight bags on the sofa and searches them. She takes out my scissors, sets them on the coffee table, and then rifles through my folder and the pages of my journal. It’s full of my doodles, quotes I like, papers and bits of magazines. There is nothing in there to use against Mom and Dad, or at least I don’t think so.

Ms. Bowl-hair hands me my bag without returning the scissors and carries the other backpacks outside. The police car is running now, heat pouring through the mesh between the driver’s seat and the back. I slide inside. Ms. Bowl-hair slams the hand-less car door shut and walks away.

Superglue

I refuse to look at the social worker. I draw squares on a scrape of paper swiped from her desk instead of talking. We are sitting in her office. There's gauze taped to my arm from where they drew blood at the hospital. They gave us full medical exams and then the social worker brought us here. Hailey and Travis are in some sort of a daycare room with old beat-up toys and one of Ms. Bowl-hairs minions. I stare at the ink lines, tasting super glue.

"Do your parents have a lot of friends?"

I don't want to hear anything she has to say, let alone answer.

"Do your parents throw parties?"

Do you? I ask in my head. Bet you've never been to one.

"What kind of food do you have for dinner?"

The kind you eat, idiot.

"Would you like a Coke?"

As if I could be bribed with a Coke. That stuff is like battery acid.

"How about some McDonalds? Bet you're hungry."

Mom would have a cow if I ate that.

"Does your mom cook dinner, or does your dad?"

They both do, this isn't the fifties.

“Do you have a washer and dryer at home? Who does laundry?”

What kind of stupid questions is that? What do you think we have? A wash board?

“What’s home school like? Wouldn’t you rather be in public school like other kids?”

I’ve been going to high school for two months. Isn’t that in your paperwork?

“Do a lot of people come over to your house?”

Define a lot. Maybe she doesn’t have friends. Maybe a lot to her is like four.

“Do strangers come to your house?”

No, not even the Jehovah witnesses. We live in the boonies. Didn’t you already ask this?

“Do you ever feel afraid?”

I want to scream at her. No! No, I have never been afraid until this morning. But I don’t, or maybe I just can’t. I cover the paper in pen inked right-angles until she leaves.

Afghan Prison

Ms. Bowl-hair leaves me in the room for what seems like forever. I swipe her business card, some pamphlets on drug use, and another on foster care. There's no clock in the room. I doodle a tall building with dozens of windows and bars. A sheet ladder is dropping down from the highest floor when she comes back and we leave.

"The Andersons are an older couple, but really nice people. You'll like it there," she tells us in the car. It's spotless inside, like she just bought it, but smells like stale coffee.

"How long will we have to stay?" I ask.

"Usually a situation like this is temporary until family is able to make arrangements and petition the court."

When it comes to holidays and summer barbeques we have lots of family. Everyone comes to our place because it's deep in the woods. All of Mom's friends are aunts and Dad's are uncles. But on family, actual blood family, we're a bit poor. My Dad's parents don't speak to us anymore. Grandma Laverne calls Mom the "California flake". Grandpa Jim doesn't talk at all. They'd rather see Dad go through a hundred seizures a day than smoke weed. When he started growing it they disowned us.

That leaves Mom's side, but her parents and brother live in California. They visit us in the summer sometimes, but I don't think the Ms. Bowl-hairs of the world would approve of them any more than they approve of Mom and Dad. All their kids smoke weed. They voted for Prop 215 in '96. Was Mom allowed to call them after getting arrested?

I want to ask if we can stay with one of our aunts or uncles. They would take us in I'm sure. We've all stayed over a hundred times, but this is different. They avoid cops. Weed puts them at risk too. I'm afraid if I ask then Bradley and Angela will end up in another coffee-smelling Buick on their way to some stranger's house, so I stay silent.

The sun is going down when we pull up in front of an old two-story house with peeling teal paint. The slanted porch makes the house frown. I think I've been in this neighborhood before for trick-or-treating with my cousins.

Ms. Welks knocks on the door. I try to remember if this was a good house gave out mini chocolate bars or a lame one with those peanut butter chews with the texture of pasty chalk.

A short, skinny woman in faded granny jeans and a navy sweatshirt with kittens on it opens the door. We follow the social worker inside and stop just inside the door. Travis and Hailey crowd near me to let the woman walk past.

The first thing I notice as the Ms. Bowl-hair introduces us to Libby Anderson is stale vanilla candles mixed with old house musk and the smell of cooking hamburger. The next thing is the afghans. They cover everything. An orange and brown one is tossed over the back of the couch. Two blue ones

sprawl over both recliners. The starts of new ones hang out of a basket next to one of the recliners.

I hate afghans. They're scratchy and your toes always poke through when you're trying to get comfortable. Grandma Laverne gave me one for Christmas when I was eight. I wanted a Bratz doll.

"Welcome to our home, it's nice to meet you," Mrs. Anderson, the afghan lady, says. From one of the recliners Mr. Anderson nods his bald head at us then goes back to watching the Green Bay Packers on TV.

"I have your rooms set up if you'd like to see them?" Afghan Lady says.

She stares at us with a stuck smile until we nod.

Upstairs she opens the first door to the left. It has two twin beds divided by a tall dresser. There are two small windows high on the wall making the room look like a jail cell. On each bed is a pink and purple striped afghan.

"This will be for the girls," she says, and then opens the next door. It's a small room with a twin bed covered in a blue-and-green striped afghan.

"And this is for you." She looks at Travis. "The bathroom is the next door and our room is at the end of the hall. Our room is off limits. Respect our privacy and we'll respect yours."

Afghan Lady smiles as if she needs to make this friendlier. It's not like we would go into her bedroom ever anyway. Isn't every adult's room off limits?

"Why don't you guys unpack your stuff and get settled," Ms. Bowl-hair says, "while Mrs. Anderson and I talk downstairs."

“Dinner is in the oven. I’ll call you down when it’s ready,” Afghan Lady says.

I put the bags on the bed. A wallpaper border of cabbage roses chases along the cream walls under a faded framed print of Jesus surrounded by children. There’s a Bible verse potheads love — “I have given you every herb bearing seed upon the earth and to you it shall be for meat”. It goes something like that. I wonder if Jesus would have issues with Dad’s medication.

Travis hovers in the hallway.

“Go put your stuff away,” I tell him.

He stands there like a deaf-mute until I walk past him and flip on his light switch. Hailey attaches her self to me like a tail that I will trip over if I step backwards. The wallpaper border decorating theme is repeated in his room with a string brown bears frolicking in green grass. A wooden bookshelf holds old kids’ books with cracked bindings and plastic baskets with toddler toys.

“This is a baby room, Allie,” Travis says.

“Doesn’t matter,” I say. “We won’t be here long.”

“You really think so?”

“Yeah, Mom and Dad will make bail and we’ll go home.” He sets his backpack down on the bed and I leave.

A pink stuffed bear sits on one of the girl beds. Pink bear, pink roses, pink afghans -everything in this room is pink, purple or white. There’s nothing girly about my room back home. Not a sliver of wall shows either. Every inch is

covered with posters, magazine tear-outs, quotes inked on printer paper. It's lived in. Nothing lives in this pink room. I sit next to the backpacks on the bed.

Hailey touches the bear with the tip of her finger. I open up her backpack and take out her elephant. She grabs it, buries her face in it and crawls up on the bed beside me. Unpacking anything else is pointless. After a few minutes Travis comes into the room. We sit there like people waiting for a bus.

Make it work, or not

Twenty minutes later Afghan Lady's voice vibrates up the stairs, "Kids, dinner's ready!"

Downstairs Ms. Bowl-hair stands near the door.

"Do you like your rooms?"

Travis nods. One nod seems to be enough for her.

"Okay. If you need anything, just let me know. Do you have any questions?"

"When are we going home?" Travis asks.

"That'll be up to the judge."

"But when our parents get out of jail, we'll be able to go home, right?"

"It's a bit more complicated than that. The charges against your parents are very serious."

"But we'll be able to go home when they get out, right?"

"Everyone wants what's best for you and your sisters," Ms. Bowl-hair says. I can tell by how she says it she doesn't think what's best is for us is our parents.

"Let me know if the children need anything or if you have any problems," she tells the Afghan Lady. "I'll call the school in the morning to let them know you'll be bringing Travis and Hailey in to register."

At this Travis looks at me with huge eyes; an owl who is about to squawk.
I mouth *shush*.

“I’m sure you kids are starving,” Afghan Lady says. “I’ve set the table tonight, but that will be your job in the future Allison.”

My job? In the future? What future? We weren’t going to be here that long.

The Andersons’ dining table is set with white plates, a platter with sliced meatloaf, a large bowl of instant mashed potatoes, and a dish of peas, canned.

“Go ahead and sit,” she says as her husband takes the chair at the head of the table. “Hailey, why don’t you come sit by me.”

She pulls out a chair between herself and her husband. Hailey hesitates and looks at me. I give her a little nod and smile, pushing at her back with my fingertips until she finally goes around the table.

“So your parents got themselves in a bit of trouble, eh?” Mr. Anderson asks. He looks at me, eye brows rising like grey, fuzzy caterpillars.

Afghan Lady gives him a look, cutting off whatever I might have said with, “Let’s not talk about that. I’m sure the children have had a long day already.”

“It’s not like they don’t know what’s going on, Lib. It was in tonight’s paper, so they better get used to people asking questions.”

I use my fork to portion off small chunks of meatloaf. It was in the paper? Everyone knows? His words repeat in my head like garden stones chucked in a wheelbarrow, weighing me down.

“Let’s talk about more pleasant stuff. Ms. Welks told me you just started high school, Allison. Do you like it better than home school?”

I want to tell her it's Allie, I like to be called Allie. "It's alright."

"Must be hard making friends when you're home schooled."

I hope I still do. I think of Lacey, Beth, and Sara, hoping their parents don't get the paper.

She turns to Travis next. "Are you excited to be starting school, Travis?"

He looks up at her, mouth stopping mid-chewing, then shrugs and looks down at his plate as if the answer was in the mashed potatoes.

"I'm sure you'll make tons of friends," she says. "In the morning, I'll drop Allie off at the high school and take you and Hailey to the grade school. After tomorrow, though, you'll all take the bus. It stops right down on the corner."

Afghan Lady's repertoire of dinner conversation starters for foster kids must be exhausted because she stops asking questions. I manage to eat a few bites of onion soup flavored meatloaf and push around the rest to make it look like I'm eating more. Travis picks his plate clean. Mom says there's a black hole where his stomach is.

"Don't you want to eat more than that, sweetie?" Afghan Lady asks, looking at Hailey's mostly full plate.

"She's doesn't eat a lot," I say, and then want to bite back the words as I remember all the questions the social worker asked. Mom says Hailey eats when she wants to and doesn't worry about it. Would Ms. Bowl-hair use that against her?

Afghan Lady looks skeptical, but gives a little nod. "Allison, help me clear the table and do the dishes. Travis and Hailey can go into the living room and watch TV."

Travis and Hailey follow Mr. Anderson out to the living room and I pick up dirty plates and silverware.

"Just rinse everything off and load the dishwasher," she says. "Do you know how? Did you have a dishwasher at home?"

I nod. Dad gave Mom a dishwasher a few years ago. It was purchased with profits from the harvest. He snuck it into the kitchen on Christmas Eve and cursed the whole time he was installing it while Mom was out doing last-minute shopping.

I rinse and load the dishwasher. Afghan Lady hovers in the kitchen, watching. Apparently inmates in the Anderson penitentiary aren't to be left unsupervised.

After the dishwasher is loaded I sit the couch next to Travis. Hailey crawls in my lap. Afghan Lady guesses wrong game show answers, knitting needles in hand, while her husband reclines in his chair with a beer. On the wall above them is an old painting of a doe in a misty field. Deer come into our back field all the time. In the summertime Dad chases them away from the gardens and in the winter he baits them for deer season, an endlessly changing message of welcome and not welcome.

Wheel of Fortune ends and Afghan Lady announces, "Ok, shower time. Allison, why don't you go up first and help Hailey, then Travis can take his shower afterwards."

All three of us follow her upstairs. She shows us where everything is, turns on the little lamp in the bedroom and goes downstairs. The clock on the dresser says 8:14 p.m. We're usually in the living room watching TV with Mom and Dad right now. If it's Mom's night, it's some sort of creative show or the travel channel. On Dad's night, it's cop shows or sports. It's Tuesday, Mom's night. In forty-five minutes *Project Runway* would be coming on. Dad would be in his chair, a cloud of weed smell floating around him as Mom and I evaluated each design.

"Go take a shower," I tell Travis.

"I don't want to."

"You want her to come back up here?"

He heads for the bathroom like a boy condemned and it isn't until now that it occurs to me that I might never mock Tim Gunn saying "make it work" with Mom again. I curl up on the bed. On the other bed Hailey mimics me, lying on her side and clutching her elephant. Her thumb is in her mouth. She hasn't sucked her thumb in two years.

We lie there until Travis comes back.

"Did you tell them anything?" he asks.

"Tell who what?"

"That social worker lady."

"No."

“We can’t tell ‘em anything, they’re cops,” he says. “Dad says never talk to cops.”

“I know, stupid.”

No, I didn’t tell the cops or the social worker anything. I know the rules. But I think they have assumptions. Mom says those are worse than the truth. I pull out one of Hailey’s nightgowns and toss it at her. Big sister, little sister shower time just wasn’t happening. They heard Travis shower. Maybe Afghan Lady will think we’re quick.

Hailey puts her nightgown on backwards. I tuck her in, then pick up her dirty clothes and stuff them into her backpack. Travis is biting his lip again. Mom keeps chap sticks in her purse and car and all over the house and I want to reach into the nightstand drawer and hand him one, but this isn’t our house.

“Is school scary?” Travis asks.

“I put chap stick in your backpack, use it,” I say in my best imitation of Mom. “No, it’s not scary. You’ll make friends and stuff. Go to bed before we get in trouble.”

“But it’s early.”

“Read one of your books then.”

The bed is flashing a pink and purple invitation to hide even though its safety is as hole-filled as the afghan covering it. I envy Travis his books. He can go disappear into one of them and forget about all of this for a while. My journals are only good for examining what’s happening, not escaping it.

Episodes

At that rest stop between awake and sleep I think of Dad's seizures, of him jerking and trembling on our dining room floor right in the middle of dinner. We were eating chicken enchiladas. Sauce splashed red-orange all over his shirt as he fell, eyes rolling up into his head and hands flopping like desperate fish. We scrambled to move chairs and anything else he might bump into out of the way. Hailey was gone to an aunt's house because she screams at every episode and that was the eighteenth one that day.

Dad hurt his back at work trying to lift some heavy piece of equipment. I can never remember the name of it. You'd think I would, since it changed everything. All I remember is one day Mom got a call and then we were at the hospital. And then he was always in pain, always on pills, always pissed off. The months that followed we spent more time with our aunts than our parents as they went to one doctor appointment after another, then surgeries, and recoveries.

Nothing worked.

The pain remained and so did this person who had replaced my Dad. The dad who couldn't do enough for my mom became the guy who was always yelling. Yelling at her for cooking dinner wrong, for not picking up our toys, for how she drove the car, for breathing; yelling at us for talking too loud, for

interrupting a television show, for being in the same room. We hid out in our bedrooms, stayed outside unless it was too bitter cold, and slept over at our cousins' constantly.

The last surgery Dad had wasn't on his back; it was in his brain to stop the pain signals sent by damaged nerves. And it worked. No more pain, no more pills, no more being pissed off, but then the seizures started and there were more pills. None of them worked. He had dozens of episodes a day. Some were so small you'd barely notice them. Others sent dinner dishes crashing to the floor, Hailey screaming, and Mom wanting to tear her hair out.

After my mom told Uncle Joe about what Dad was going through he suggested marijuana for the seizures. He's a medical grower. But that's okay in California, not in Michigan so Mom was pretty nervous about it. My parents smoked in their early twenties, but by time we were born they were over it even though some of their friends still smoked. You could smell it during summer barbeques coming from the other side of the big pines and all the adults would shoo us kids away to the front yard.

Uncle Joe sent a package of medical grade cannabis by overnight express to better avoid drug sniffing dogs and nosy package handlers. Right away, the seizures dropped by half and then over the course of a week went away all together. After the first completely seizure-free day Mom went out and got pop and pizzas and we had a party.

Our house smelled like weed, but we had our Dad back.

Alliterations

Afghan Lady drops me off in front of the high school just as the buses are pulling away. There's a rainbow lap-sized afghan in the backseat. I hope no one notices me getting out of her car. I make it to a few feet in front of the doors when some one yells out.

“Hey, Mary Jane, got any joints we can buy?”

I want to sink into the cement.

I can't help but look. A group of burnout guys wear flannels, black t-shirts and wallet chains stand near the curb grinning. One waves.

I push through the doors and swim down the hallway to my locker, my head down the whole way like I'm wearing a snorkel. Instead of water I'm submerged in voices and laughter and I know it's about me. It was in the paper. I'm a druggie kid.

Instead of exotic fish I look for my friends. Lacey, Beth, nor Sara emerges from the murky crowd of my peers.

Of the three of them, Lacey is most important. I've hung around them long enough to know Beth and Sara just follow where she leads. On the first day of school the teachers made me feel like I had a neon HOMESCHOOL FREAK sign above my head Lacey passed me a note saying she loved my pink Doc Martens.

Later she introduced me to her friends at lunch, but they only talk to me when she's around. I had been dying for a sleepover invite. Now I just hope she would still talk to me.

I grab my books for English, duck my head back down, and make my way to class.

The Mackerel, Mrs. Maki, drones on about alliteration. She's super skinny with huge dark eyes floating behind round glasses. The first day of school she wore a grayish blue-green sack dress and all I could see was a mackerel. She's randomly picking students to give examples of alliteration on the spot and gets answers like "skiing on silent, snowy Sundays" and "Aunt Anne ate apples". I sink into my chair, grateful to be sitting behind a seven foot basketball jock. If called on I don't think she'll appreciate me saying, "Maki mimics a mackerel".

"Mrs. Maki," the intercom crackles. "Please send Allison Couri to the office."

Everyone looks at me. I shuffle my toes against the floor, feeling for the emergency escape hatch every school desk should be equipped with. No such luck. The Mackerel tilts her head towards the door once, and goes back to alliterating. I gather my books, slide out of my desk and walk out of class. In the office the secretary directs me to the guidance counselor. Couri condemned to counseling.

Mrs. Joki smiles when I enter the room. I met her when Mom signed me up for classes. All she could talk about was my test scores which put my education level closer to a senior rather than a freshman. Mom thought it would

be better to keep me with kids my own age, even if it was boring. All I could think about was what a terrible name that is for a guidance counselor. Who would take advice from a person named Joki?

“Hey Allie, have a seat,” Mrs. Joki says. I slump into one the three chairs lining the wall across from her desk. They have the color and squishiness of peas.

“I heard about what happened to your parents. That’s a hard thing to be going through,” she begins. Of course she’s heard. Who hasn’t heard?

She drones on about how the social worker apprised her of the situation. I try to nod at the right times but my eyes are fixed on the college posters taped to the front of her metal desk. *Northern Naturally* is scrawled in white against a picture of a perfect fall day — the local university’s poster. Most of the kids here will go there like they’re on a conveyer belt. Cleaned, processed, canned, labeled, and off into the real world. I can’t even think about. Couri can’t contemplate college currently.

“I want you to know you can come to me anytime,” Mrs. Joki says. “I’m here to help.”

I nod again like I’m agreeing. What would I actually ever talk to her about? Before my first day of high school my parents sat me down to talk about Dad’s medication. We had already been told when Dad started using it that the weed had to be a secret. Mom explained most people believed the political propaganda about marijuana that was based more on economics than on actual harm to people so we could never say anything about it to anyone.

“Also, I need to remind you the school has a very strict policy on drug use...”

Pothead parents produce pothead progeny.

The bell ending first hour chimes and I stand up. “I’m going to be late for social studies.”

She nods. “Go ahead; I’m here if you need to talk to someone.”

I scurry out of her office, swap my books, and slip in my seat. Lacey comes in a second before the bell.

Mr. Nelson takes attendance as Lacey mouths at me, “Sorry about your parents.”

I nod and smile. She’s still talking to me. Mr. Nelson launches into a lecture on the electoral process so we can’t talk more. I tell myself maybe things will be okay after all. There might be teasing, but it will die down like when Tim Johnson dumped milk over his lap and everyone called him piss-pants for a week.

Halfway through class, Lacey slides a folded note across her desk to mine. I pull it to my lap and unfold it.

My parents said I can’t be friends with you anymore. Sorry.

She punctuates this single sentence with a little frown face. I keep staring at it. The whole world reduces to that blue-ink frown. I fold up the note and stuff it in my notebook. My face feels sunburned again. I don’t look at her, or anyone. I open my notebook and almost burn the blue lines into my retinas. I make myself pick up my pen and doodle little squares like I’m taking notes.

Every loser with a wallet chain thinks I'm cool now, but the ones I wanted to be my friends, Lacey and the others, won't come near me. No one decent wants to be friends with a pothead's kid.

California Love

When the day ends, Grandpa Dean and Grandma Joanie are waiting for us in the parking lot. Grandpa Dean's weathered face is split into a grin and Hailey clings to Grandma like a monkey. I want to run to Grandpa, but the other kids are getting on the buses so I make myself walk the whole way.

"They been giving you a hard time, kiddo?" He says when I don't hug him.

"A little, it's not that bad," I lie.

"Yeah, I bet." He gives my shoulder a squeeze. "Well, let's see if they know how to serve decent coffee in this rinky-dink town."

We pile into a rental car and pull out of the school parking lot.

"Are Mom and Dad out of jail?" I ask.

"Yeah, we bailed them out this morning," Grandpa says. "They're at home."

Travis leans forward, "We need to go to the Andersons' and get our stuff first." He pokes his head in between the front seats as far as the seatbelt allows.

"Are Mom and Dad coming to eat with us too?"

"Sit back, Travis," Grandma says.

“Slow down, kiddo,” Grandpa says. “We got them out this morning and went straight to the lawyers. That case worker woman, Ms. Welks, filed a petition to keep you kids in foster care while all this is being sorted out.”

“We can’t see Mom and Dad?” I ask.

“The hearing is tomorrow. From there we’ll figure out when you can see your folks again and if you can come and stay with me and Grandma. The lawyer said that was unlikely since we aren’t from here, but we’ll try.”

I press my head against the seat as the car turns the wrong way onto the hi-way. Home is the other direction. The pines lining the asphalt blur.

Grandma asks me, “What are the people you’re staying with like?”

“The Andersons are okay, I guess.”

“You kids should have been with us in California years ago,” Grandpa says as he pulls into a local diner. “None of this would have happened if your father wasn’t so bullheaded.”

“You can’t blame Matt for wanting to keep close to his family,” Grandma says. “They have all those health problems.”

“Bah, they wouldn’t even consider taking the kids.”

“Dean,” Grandma’s says and her tone changes.

I figured Grandma Laverne and Grandpa Jim didn’t want to get involved, but it’s different hearing it out loud. Dad’s parents are older than Mom’s. They live in an apartment building for seniors. Before the seizures we would go over there Sunday afternoons and crowd into their tiny living room for an hour or two. Grandma Laverne was always telling me not to touch things.

“It’s ok Grandma. They don’t have room for us,” I say as we get out.

We settle into a booth and Grandma asks if we want dinner. We shake our heads. I order a Mountain Dew and banana cream pie. Travis copies. Grandma asks Hailey what she wants, but she just shakes her head again.

“Just order some French fries. She’ll eat them” I say. “How are Mom and Dad doing?”

“Doing as good as can be expected,” Grandpa says.

He pauses as the waitress sets down our food, then picks up again after a sip of coffee. “Your Mom keeps cleaning the house like God himself were coming to inspect it instead of that case worker. Your Dad is pissed. He’s been calling every advocacy group in the state.”

“Are you staying at our house?” Travis asks.

“For now. If the judge will let us look after you we’ll figure out something else.”

“How was your first day of school Travis?” Grandma asks.

He tells her about everything he likes and hates. There’s a lot more he hates. Hailey eats one French fry at a time, feeding half of them to Grandpa. The banana cream pie is perfect and for a moment I stop thinking about the kids at school, jail, foster care and weed.

Bad People

Hailey throws the mother of all tantrums when they drop us off the Andersons. She screams, cries, and clings to Grandma like someone is trying to throw her into hot lava. She won't go to Grandpa, Travis, or me. Finally Afghan Lady has to pull her off of Grandma and take her screaming into the house.

"We'll see you kids after school tomorrow," Grandpa says. He helps Grandma back into the car as she fumbles with tissues from her purse. From the porch, I watch until the car turns the corner.

"Did you have dinner?" Afghan Lady asks when I come inside.

I nod. "I have a lot of homework. Is it okay if I go to my room?"

"Your sister cried herself to sleep. Travis is in his room. That boy sure likes to read."

Upstairs the bedside lamp is on. Hailey is a little ball under the afghan. I close the door behind me quietly and lie on the other bed. All I want to do is sleep, but I'm stuck at the rest stop again.

I want to scream at Lacey for not being fair. I'm the same person I was on Monday. She wants to blame her parents but at lunch my chair was missing. It simply wasn't there. Lacey, Beth, and Sara were all talking and laughing and

wouldn't look at me. I dumped my tray and hid in the handicapped stall in the girls' bathroom until lunch was over.

I roll over and pull the funny-smelling afghan over my head and stare at the cream-colored wall through its fuzzy holes. The pattern reminds me of walking under the rows of pot plants in our backwoods. When I was little the tips of the tallest plants were over my head and I would look up at the pattern the sun made through their jagged holes.

The summer after Dad's seizures stopped he cleared out a small open space in the woods to grow pot. I would follow him around the small clearing, picking up small rocks while he moved the big ones. We laid out good soil and planted small sprouts Mom coaxed from seeds in the greenhouse. Every time he went out to the grow site I went out with him to help with his "special tobacco." They didn't tell me it was marijuana until I was old enough to understand and not say the wrong thing to the wrong person. Dad would check each plant, pruning off dying leaves, looking for signs of mold or parasites, and I would mimic him. In time I could check on the plants by myself.

I drift on the edge of sleep when Travis opens the door. His face is mottled red and brows pinched in — an outraged owl.

"Tell her, Allie," he yells. "Dad needs his medication or he'll have seizures. He could die. He's a good dad."

Behind him Afghan Lady sputters as I sit up, "I was just saying its better you kids aren't living in such an environment. I'm sure your parents justified themselves in some way, but children shouldn't be raised around drugs."

“It sucks here,” Travis yells, and runs past her and slams his door shut. She blinks, stunned.

“This is exactly the bad upbringing I mean. We have been kind enough to open our home to you poor children and this is the way you treat us...”

She trails off, shaking her head. I almost say we never asked to stay in this stupid house. I don’t. I have no idea where the Buick would take us next.

“I’m going downstairs,” she says. “When your brother can be civil, you both can come down and watch TV. I bought pumpkins to carve.”

She walks stiffly downstairs. I look over at Hailey, amazed she’s still asleep, and then go to Travis’ room.

“Mom would freak out if she heard you talked that way to an adult!” I say after shutting the door.

“She said Mom and Dad were bad parents!”

“Your making Mom and Dad look bad acting like the way you did.”

“I wasn’t making them look bad! I was defending them.”

“Mom and Dad have lawyers to defend them. We’re not supposed to say anything about his medication, remember?”

“But I didn’t say anything about his medication.”

“You said he needed it for seizures, and who knows what else. We’re not allowed to say anything. They will use it against Mom and Dad.”

I know he wants to argue with me but doesn’t. He looks at the floor and mumbles, “Did I screw things up, Allie?”

“Probably not,” I say, even though I’m not sure. “But keep your trap shut. Mrs. Anderson bought us some pumpkins. We should go carve them or something.”

“Okay.”

Toke, toke, pass...

The next day in school I hide in my notebook. In first hour, I draw squares. By second hour, the squares become buildings. I skip lunch and hide out in the restroom, filling two blue-lined pages of the notebook with an entire city.

By sixth-hour art class, my city is full of windows, people, a hot air balloon, dogs, cats, afghans on clothes lines, trees, Halloween pumpkins, and a crashing plane. I put the notebook away because we are working with clay. Mr. Walters explains coil building for the first ten minutes and goes back to his own work.

The three pizza-faced boys sitting at my table pinch off a misshapen coil roll and pretend to toke it like a joint. Snickering, they pass it along the table. Toke, toke, pass, toke, toke, and pass. One holds it out to me. Yeah, like I'm going to touch that.

My hand goes up in the air and I ask, "Can I go to the restroom?"

"Yes. Don't forget the hall pass."

I get up and leave, not looking at anyone at my table. I debate on staying in the stall for the rest of the hour. Mr. Walters doesn't notice anything once he starts painting trout, bluegills, or whatever fish he can construct out of old car parts and scrap metal.

I practice telling Mom I was wrong about public school. I'll tell her I'm not learning anything (I'm not really), I'm not making any friends (totally, miserably, true), I miss being home.

Little painful pricks stab the backs of my eyes and I squeeze them shut. My nose gets red when I cry. I will not cry.

I make myself leave the stall. I don't want to be in class, but I don't want to be somewhere I think too much either. Three junior jock guys swim down the hall, shoving each other lightly from one side to the other. Juniors never notice freshman. I just keep walking.

I pass them and hear a voice call out, "Hey."

Don't turn, don't look. Just keep walking and act like you don't think that was for you.

"Hey, I heard about your parents." One of the junior jock boys is looking at me. He's wearing a school logo t-shirt over basketball shorts. His friends disappear into the locker room.

"That really sucks." His hair is buzzed down almost nothing against his tanned skull and he runs a hand over it, like he was used to having more hair.

"Yeah."

"My parents do that shit too, so it's like, all cool. Don't worry about it so much."

"Thanks." I'm uncertain what I should say to that. Is it suppose to make me feel better that there are other pothead parents in the world?

“Anyways, I was wondering if you could score us some good shit. Ya’ know? I heard your dad was into medical. That is the best stuff.”

I want to be offended but he’s not trying not to be a jerk. He shuffles his feet, waiting for an answer.

“Uhm, no. My dad’s not a dealer or anything.”

“Yeah, I understand. It is probably not a good time to ask right now, eh?”

He turns to the locker room. I try to make myself walk normally down the hallway but a freaked-out sensation in my chest pushes my Docs faster. I slip into the art room and hide behind a tilted tower of drunken clay snakes until the final bell rings.

Grandma and Grandpa are waiting for me when I go outside. I climb in the car, dying to hear good news.

“How about we get pizza?” Grandpa says as he pulls out of the parking lot.

We skip the chain pizzerias and go to a local restaurant with old mining photos on the walls. Grandpa orders two pizzas, one with veggies and the other pepperoni. Travis tells him about schools. The little owl face just can’t seem to shut up about his teachers, other kids, and how smart he is until the pizza comes and his mouth is stuffed with cheese and pepperoni.

I take two slices of veggie pizza. Grandma puts one slice Hailey’s plate.

“So, are we going home?” I ask.

“I’m sorry kiddo, but you’re staying with the Andersons for a little longer. The judge is giving the case worker time to evaluate everything.”

“But that’s not fair!” People glance at our table.

“Calm down,” Grandpa says. “I know it’s not, but we have to deal with it.

The good news is the judge is allowing visitation. You can see your folks for a few hours on Saturday.”

“Why can’t we stay with you?” Travis asks.

“We don’t have a place here,” Grandpa says.

“But Mrs. Anderson said Mom and Dad are bad parents,” Travis says.

“Don’t pay her any mind,” Grandma says.

“What does evaluate things mean? How long does that take?” I don’t even know what she’s evaluating. There’s nothing to evaluate. Mom and Dad are good parents. Why can’t anyone understand that?

“Evaluating means she’s going to check out the house,” Grandpa says, “your school and health records. Things like that. Then she makes a recommendation to the judge. The hearing is set for November 11th.”

I count in my head — twelve more days of clay joints, a pink room, and super glue.

Unglued

Mr. Nelson writes Michigan's 2008 Ballot across the blackboard as the class quiets down. "Yesterday we talked about the presidential and congressional elections. Today we are going to take a look at Michigan's Ballot Proposals. Does anyone know what a ballot initiative is?"

In the back of the class I'm drawing buildings again, big ones, small ones, strange sci-fi ones. I etch in an inky figure suicide jumping from a bubble-topped skyscraper when Lacey's hand goes up.

"A ballot initiative is when a group of people gather enough signatures to put an issue up for a vote."

"Good, Lacey. How many votes are needed to put an initiative on the ballot?"

"Like 10% of how many voted for the Governor?" someone says.

"Close, it's actually a bit more complicated." Chalk scratches across the blackboard. "For statutes, signatures equaling 8% are needed, for amendments, 10%, and 5% for a veto referendum. This year we have one statute initiative and one amendment. Does anyone know what they are?"

I add a small building with an awning and sign that reads “Vote Here” at the bottom of the page. I know one of the initiatives, but nothing will make me raise my hand to say it.

Apparently no one else is willing to either. Or maybe they just don’t know, or don’t care. Chalk scrapes across the board again.

“Proposal 1 is a statute proposing a legislative initiative to permit the use and cultivation of marijuana for specified medical conditions. Proposal 2 is an amendment proposing to amend the state constitution to address human embryo and human embryonic stem cell research. Anyone know what those two issues are about?”

“Yeah, they’re trying to legalize pot,” someone in the back says. A few laughs answer. I twitch my feet against the floor, looking for the trap door.

“Well, sort of. There’s a bit more to it than that. Anyone else?”

“It’s for cancer patients and stuff. So they don’t puke from chemo,” a girl’s voice from the other side of the room answers. Sara’s maybe.

“My dad says that’s a bunch of crap,” a boy says.

“It is not crap!” someone else says. “My grandpa had cancer. Chemo makes you really sick. He couldn’t eat.”

More voices chime in, going back and forth about what the proposal means until someone says, “Why don’t you ask Allie. Bet her parents are voting for it.”

“Criminals can’t vote,” someone else calls back.

“Calm down now,” Mr. Nelson says. “Allie, would you like to contribute?”

I stare at my ballpoint-ink city, feeling the burn creep into cheeks. I tip my eyes up and look at Mr. Nelson. No, I have nothing to contribute. Mr. Nelson waits. There's no trapdoor. I shift in my seat and turn my pen sideways.

"Proposal 1 was put together by the MCCC because people are going to jail for smoking marijuana for illnesses that other medications can't help..."

Mr. Nelson looks at me, waiting for more. Isn't that enough of a contribution?

"What is the MCCC?" he prompts.

I focus on my pen. "It stands for the Michigan Coalition for Compassionate Care. They want to make it so you can get permission from the state to use marijuana and the cops can't arrest you for it."

"Can just anyone sign up with the state to use marijuana?"

"No, a doctor has to approve it. Like a prescription. It's only for people with medical problems," I hesitate a second, then add, "Like my Dad."

"Thank you, Allie," Mr. Nelson says, and then continues. "Let's have a mock vote. Everyone raise your hand if you would vote yes on Proposal 1."

Over half of the class raises their hands and I half lift mine. Mr. Nelson does a quick count and writes the number on the board.

"And those voting no?"

Mr. Nelson writes a much smaller number on the board.

"It looks like we would pass Proposal 1. Let's talk about Proposal 2."

I duck my head back down as he explains stem cell research. The class is quickly absorbed into debating the issue and it's clear which students come from

anti-abortion households. I tune them all out and focus on my drawing. I add in Proposal 1 under my "Vote Here" sign and dozens of smiling ink people lining the street to vote.

Lacey catches up to me in the hall after class.

"Your dad has cancer?"

"No," I pull my books tight to my chest. "He has seizures. He used to have dozens a day before he started smoking."

"Oh, that sucks."

"Yeah."

"Later." She walks away as I mouth "later" back.

Dia de los Muertos Girl

On Saturday morning I hide out in my room and catch up on the homework I've been avoiding all week. The stuff I can still turn in anyways. One of the so-called stupid boys from Travis' class lives down the block so he shot out the door as soon as he inhaled a bowl of cereal. Afghan Lady is trying to teach Hailey how to knit downstairs.

I calculate the area and perimeter of triangles, squares and hexagons. Is it against some sort of teenager rule that it's disappointing to not learn anything new?

Visitation with our parents is scheduled for two o'clock and will be supervised by Ms. Bowl-hair. What does she think my parents are going to do? Give us drugs? Whip out a gun on the Afghan Lady and take us away?

I wish.

I have two more hours to kill after Afghan Lady's lunch of macaroni and cheese mixed with hot dogs. I borrow scissors, put on my headphones and open my journal. On a fresh page, I glue in Ms. Bowl-hair's business card and draw quote bubbles sprouting from the sides — "Would you like a Coke?" "Would you like some McD's?" "Would you like to rat out your parents?" Across the bottom, I paste in a foster care pamphlet cut-out reading "How did I get here?" and draw

arrows from every side to the business card. On the next page, I paste in a cartoon from the drug pamphlet of a kid in a “just say no” t-shirt with a quote bubble reading “drugs are not cool”. I cross out “not cool” and filled the white space around the cartoon with “medication” written over and over and over.

I fill the next two blank pages with the word HOME in every writing style I can think of- big, small, cursive, print, chicken scratch, doctor, serial killer. On the page after I paste in a caption from the drug pamphlet, “the truth about drugs”, and draw in a speak-no-evil stick figure, hands over mouth and no eyes. No one wants to hear that every “just say no” commercial they’ve ever seen was wrong. Happy families and pot-smoke don’t mix.

It’s such bullshit.

I flop back on the bed. After Dad started growing he needed help when the harvest came in. There was more weed than he needed so he helped other people like him. I don’t know if it ever occurred to him to “just say no” to helping the people like Mrs. Swanson or Jimmer. Maybe we wouldn’t be here if he had.

Once the plants were cut and dried, all the buds had to be trimmed. Mom would have all my aunts over for trim parties. She would lay out a large painter’s tarp in the middle of the kitchen floor and surround it with dining room chairs. Centered on the tarp were plastic tubs filled with the dried stems. The aunts would arrive in old, throw-away clothes with their favorite pairs of pruning shears and food — taco dip, potato salad, Swedish meatballs, mini-pasties, and brownies us kids couldn’t touch. They would talk, laugh, trade recipes, swap gossip, and give advice while carefully clipping away the buds. All the leaves,

stems and unusable things were dropped in a burn pile while the buds went into cardboard trays on the counters. Everything — the house, their clothes, their hands and hair — reeked of pot.

I'm sitting on the porch wondering if there will ever be another trimming party when Mom and Dad pull up in the Jeep. I smile and wave. Mom waves back but they don't get out of the car.

Travis runs to the driver's side window. Dad rolls down the window and says something I can't hear. Travis walks back to the porch and kicks at some leaves.

"They have to wait for Ms. Welks," Afghan Lady says from behind me. Hailey is at her side.

"That's stupid," I mutter.

"It's the rules."

Ten minutes later Ms. Bowl-hair pulls up. Mom and Dad get out of the Jeep as she parks. Travis slingshots off the porch and at Dad's side before the social worker can say, "Sorry I'm late."

I run over to Mom and give her a big hug, burying my head against her shoulder and breathing in the smell from her shirt. I don't let myself cry because if I do, she will and she hates a red nose as much as I do.

She holds me tight for a moment, and then Hailey is pushing in between, her voice a demanding litany.

"Want mom! Want mom! Want mom!"

Mom lets me go and picks up Hailey. Her nose already looks like a misshapen cherry tomato, puffy and red.

“If you’d like to come inside I have coffee made,” Afghan Lady says.

“Well, it’s beautiful out today, so I was thinkin’...,” Dad starts but Mom interrupts, her eyes straying to the house.

“Yes, that’d be nice. Thank you,” Mom says.

We follow Afghan Lady and the social worker into the house and everyone settles into the living room. Mom’s eyes are going everywhere as Dad hovers near the door. Travis is pushing gold-starred homework up at his face.

“Want to show me your room?” Mom says to Hailey. She nods with a snuffle.

“I’ll show you,” I say and head for the stairs.

Upstairs, Mom looks around both rooms with her lips pressed together.

“How are you kids really doing?”

“We’re all right. I mean, they’re not mean to us or anything.”

“Are you eating enough? Not a lot of junk, right?”

“Yeah, the food is okay.”

I don’t mention the Andersons think they’re bad parents or what’s happening in school. Her face is blotchy — red nosed, pale cheeks, creased forehead, and smudges of plum under her eyes. Is there a word for how worn out she looks? It’s worse then when Dad was sick.

Foot steps on the stairs announce Ms. Bowl-hair. “Oh, there you are.”

“The girls are showing me their room,” Mom says as she adjusts Hailey’s weight on her hip.

“Of course. Like I told you Mrs. Couri, the children are very comfortable and safe here.”

Mom nods and we go downstairs. My parent’s eyes meet for a second, passing some silent communication, then Afghan Lady is handing them coffee.

“Come see ‘umpkin,” Hailey says, tugging on Mom’s sleeve before proceeding to drag her towards the door.

“How are you and Dad doing?” I ask outside. I really want to ask about the charges against them, about lawyers, about everything, but at the same time I don’t want to think of any of it.

“The best as we can. The house is really empty without you guys. Your dad’s been on the phone and emailing everybody he can think of to help us get you home.”

“Bob, Mr. Puffy, and Grumpy face,” Hailey says as she names off the pumpkins. Her pumpkin was Mr. Puffy, who I carved for her. She had more fun flinging seeds and pumpkin guts around Afghan Lady’s kitchen.

“Speaking of Halloween,” Mom says, “I brought your costumes from home.”

She goes to the car and brings back three paper bags. Our names and smiley faces have been written on each in marker.

“I thought I’d help you get dressed since I won’t be here to see you off trick-or-treating.”

I take the bag from her. I don't even want to go trick-or-treating. I just want to go home and watch TV, or do chores, or anything. Sit there while Dad watches hockey? No problem. Scrub every wall in the house because social workers are evil? I'll get right on it. Trudge out into the freezing Halloween night to get my siblings tons of teeth rotting candy they won't share? Sure, as long as I get to go home at the end of the night. I don't even need a costume.

We go inside and she hands Travis his bag and opens up Hailey's for her. My little sister is yet again a Disney princess. This year it's Mulan and I'm glad she picked the butt-kicking princess. Travis is some sort of undead wizard. He called it a liche. But who understands fantasy-geek boy speak?

I pull out the colorful multi-tired Mexican skirt and embroidered white off – the-shoulder blouse Mom has been sewing for me over the past few weeks and skeleton-colored long underwear to keep warm under it all. Plus, all the make-up and fake flowers I'll need to become a Dia de Los Muertos skeleton girl. My grandparents sent me two of the fancy dressed skeleton figurines from a trip they took to Mexico last year. They were cool, both pretty and scary at the same time.

Mom helps Hailey and Travis into their costumes. In the upstairs bathroom, I put on the long underwear first. Mom blacked out parts of it so it resembles bones on my arms, legs and upper chest. I slip on the skirt and blouse and then part my hair in the middle and pin in the red and orange fake flowers like a headband.

I peer into the mirror and apply my makeup. White cream to make me skeleton pale and then black on my nose and around my eyes. I draw thin lines

for skeleton teeth over my lips. Then I add colorful flowers in my forehead, elegant swirls from each temple and across each cheek, and a rosette on my chin.

In the mirror my lips curve. A smiling, pretty skeleton looks back. My costume choice seems ironic now. Marijuana is illegal because of Mexicans, or the people who hate them at least. They flooded into the US after the Mexican Revolution and brought weed with them. When the Great Depression came and jobs were scarce, weed was outlawed so they could send Mexicans back to Mexico for having it, even if they were legally in the states.

Safe

Our grandparents picked us up the Sunday after Halloween for pizzas. They have very little news. Dad is still talking to his friends and has secured a lawyer from downstate. He and Mom have been charged with manufacturing, distribution and possession. The lawyer says a lot will hinge on Tuesday's vote.

The people Dad helps are the some of the same people who are working to push Proposal 1 through. Even though they are passionate, they're paranoid. Some are too scared to let anyone know they smoke even though they need it. Others worry the registry system would just be another tool for cops to use against us. Like having the medical marijuana card could be the same as flying a giant pot leaf flag outside your bedroom window. Others, like Dad, argue legalization is the only way to be safe from prosecution and criminals.

On election night, the Andersons are more worried about who will be president than what's happening with the ballot proposals. Mr. Anderson drinks beer as Afghan Lady creates yet another colorful, scratchy creation. She purses her lips at each blue state that shows up on the election map. They both voted for McCain. There are a lot of red ones too.

They cheer when Texas goes red, but when Michigan goes blue Mr. Anderson gets up from his chair and goes into the kitchen for another beer, grumbling, "What a bunch of baloney. This state's going straight to hell..."

He flops back down in the recliner and fiddles with the remote.

Don't change it. The news lady starts to announce the rest of the results and he sips his beer, remote in hand.

"With an end result of 62% over 37%, Michigan voters have approved Proposal 1...." The reporter says.

"I'll be damned," Mr. Anderson says and changes the channel. "It won't hold. Bet you they will overturn it in less than a year."

If I was home we would be a having a party, cheers, and maybe even some tears. I run upstairs to tell Travis. He's lying on the bed reading a book.

"It passed!" I say and ruffle his hair with both my hands.

He shakes my hands off and says, "What passed?"

"Proposal 1, stupid. Dad isn't a criminal anymore."

He gives a whoop and a fist pump in the air. "Does that mean we get to go home?"

"I don't know, but they can't keep putting Mom and Dad in jail if it's legal, right?"

"Who cares then if we can't go home," he says, deflated. He rolls onto his stomach and picks up the book.

"I'm sure they'll let us go home soon."

"Yeah, sure."

I go back to my room wishing I could tell him for sure we're going home but I can't. Hailey is already asleep. I lie down on my bed in the dark. At home we would be having a celebration party. I heard Dad talking to Mom about having a party on election night after one of his meetings. He never doubted the proposal would pass. There's too many of us, he said.

At home all of our aunts and uncles and Dad's coalition friends would be there. They're patients now, not criminals. Mom would have the kitchen counters covered in all sorts of food. There'd be music playing and the election results on TV. Mom would have turned down the tunes when the news lady read the results. Everyone would have whooped and hollered when she said we won. Dad would lights up his bowl and holds it up high.

Gateways

I'm in Ms. Bowl-hair's office drawing a city full of dapper skeletons while she talks. She's interviewing us again now that she's inspected our house, subjected us to medical exams, and interviewed everyone we know. Maybe everyone is an exaggeration.

"I've been talking with Mrs. Anderson and your guidance counselor. They both have wonderful things to say about you. You and your brother far exceed the education levels of your peers. I know you haven't wanted to talk with me, but it would be helpful if you would..."

My skeletons are smoking cigarettes, or maybe joints.

"The charges against your parents are serious. I'm concerned about the welfare of you and your siblings in such an environment..."

Pen hovering over the paper, I say, "Concerned about what? You think we are getting high?"

"Frankly, yes."

"That's stupid."

"It's a realistic concern, Allison. Have you ever smoked marijuana? Maybe taken some when your parents weren't looking?"

“No. That’s my father’s medication. I wouldn’t touch that any more then I would take any other prescription drugs. Neither would my brother or sister.”

“A lot of kids do,” she says.

She doesn’t believe me. I want to both argue with her and clam up again.

Why ask questions if you don’t care about the answers?

“You gave me a drug test, didn’t you?”

“Yes, that was part of your health exam.”

“And it was clean, right? So what’s the big deal? Some kid’s parents drink all the time and you don’t put them in foster care. Even Mr. Anderson drinks beer. Why is that ok but Dad’s medication isn’t?”

“Alcohol is legal, and while marijuana just became legalized for medical use, it’s still considered more dangerous.”

“That’s dumb, though. Alcohol is way more toxic and dangerous then weed. No one smokes a joint and beats up their wife or kids. They watch TV and eat too much.”

Her lips twitch, almost a smile.

“It’s considered a gateway drug. I’m concerned about your father’s marijuana usage, regardless of the reason.”

Seriously? Does this woman not read?

“You know the gateway theory is total b.s., right?”

“How so?”

Ok, she really doesn’t read.

“It’s been proven wrong by tons of studies. Saying smoking weed leads to using other drugs is like saying riding a bike leads kids to being a badass biker. Millions of people try weed, and like only a half million experiment in harder stuff.”

“You seem to know a lot about that. Are your parents advocates for legalization?”

“No, they are advocates for making educated decisions and not following propaganda.” I’m irritated now. How can a woman this stupid have so much control over my life? “They support medical usage because there are real medical uses like stopping seizures, multiple sclerosis, glaucoma, pain, post traumatic stress, nausea from chemotherapy, and Crohn's Disease. There’s tons of info out there, studies and stuff. You just have to look for yourself instead of stupidly following what TV commercials tell you.”

She’s looking down at her papers, jotting notes, and asks without looking up. “It helps Crohn’s?”

Mr. Nieminsky’s face pops into my head, all pinched and tight coming into the door of our house, and all relaxed when leaving. “Yeah, it helps your digestive and immune system work better so the pain and stuff from Crohn’s goes down. For some people it goes away all together I guess.”

She taps the end of her pen against her papers for a moment.

“You seem to know a lot about marijuana as a medication. Enough that I find it hard to believe you see it as a drug. Given that, and all the other positive information I’ve received, I’m going to recommend you be returned to your parents pending the outcome of their trial.”

“But don’t think I’m not still a bit concerned,” she adds. “There will be regular monitoring of your home situation.”

She could come over everyday for dinner is she wants, just as long as we get to go home.

“Thank you, Ms. Welks.”

Home

Everything happens on a Tuesday and November 11th is the longest one ever. I'm in fourth-hour math when the hearing's scheduled time comes. Numbers become as abstract as Kandinsky paintings. I try feeling out across the miles to the courthouse. Mom says sometimes when you're close to people you can feel them and pick up an inkling of what they're going through. I feel and feel, but I have no idea what the judge has decided.

At lunch I sit with Lacey, Beth and Sara but can't eat. They can't hang out with me outside of school because of their parents, but maybe that will change one day. On Monday, Missy Aho wore a skirt that was a little too short. She tripped and flashed pink thong underwear to the entire sophomore class during an assembly. Her underwear is more interesting than my pothead Dad. Students still ask me to score them joints. I just say no.

When the final bell sounds for the day I can't decide between walking very slow and running as fast as I can. If my Dad's Jeep isn't out there, I want this walk to take as long as possible. If it is, I want to teleport.

I push open the door to a parking lot covered in sparkling white under a hazy grey sky. The snow is coming down quickly, collecting and building. There

might be a foot on the ground by morning, maybe even a snow day. Dad's Jeep is parked across from the doors.

“Hurry up, Allie! We're going to get pizza!” Travis yells from the open back window. I stand there long enough to see Mom twist in the passenger seat, probably telling him to close the window, and then I run

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