Desideratum

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Desideratum

By

Laurie A. Buckley

A Thesis
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Desideratum

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Introduction

As a poet, I’ve never invested such a span of time into a single creative work before; but for this Thesis project, I spent a year with my head inside this story, developing it until it grew lengthy with descriptions of demons and problems stemming from outdated, draconian drug policies. This project began as a piece of a short story I wrote in the interest of acceptance into Professor Schwarzschild’s Fiction Workshop. In preparation for my assignment, and in the interest of familiarizing myself with the history of cannabis, the social climate surrounding it, scientific information about the plant, and the criminal culture fostered by its prohibition, I read and reported on ten books for an Independent Study with Professor Earleywine. I also used several authoritative websites to familiarize myself with current cannabis news from scientific, political, and social perspectives; from this, I came away with a bank of knowledge very useful to my undertaking of this creative endeavor. Additionally, I visited Colorado in an attempt to fully understand the climate created by legalization. I aimed for believability in my Thesis; I built my scenes deliberately and with great consideration to presenting a realistic fictional account of multiple generations of substance abusers and their criminal activities, while intending to call into question the legitimacy of the very policies that in most instances made the Millbrook family deviants of society.

Contemporary cannabis fiction is rarely written by or about women, so it was important to make Cassidy’s voice just as strong as John’s, and her complexities compelling, in order to achieve a feminine depiction of cannabis use. It was my goal to encourage an open and honest exploration of contemporary cannabis culture through both a recreational and medical lens, in a time when cannabis is gradually garnering more and more attention from the mainstream.
I’m a big fan of poetic license, which is why you’ll find unusual sentence structures and words I felt were better sewn together than apart throughout the work. This project has been a profound challenge and one of great personal and artistic growth. At first, I was worried about completing the length requirements and doing so coherently and consistently. But, in the end, I found what I believed to be a compelling story to tell. The essential conflict of the piece is the illegality of cannabis, but I also used the character of Cassidy to portray the internal struggles of an addict searching for a foothold in society. I felt it important to explore cannabis in terms of both its recreational and medical uses, and to highlight its value as a substitute for alcohol and harder drugs. By following this family of cannabis users and the terrible consequences that befall them, I attempted to elaborate on the overall tapestry they’re a part of. To affix the family to a larger mission, I included John’s participation in the Secret Society of the Study of Cannabis—a network of growers and scientists in favor of unimpeded study and practical use of cannabis. I wanted to create a sense of camaraderie and commitment to the cause of building a base of knowledge about cannabis in a way which government policies have long forbidden. When John met Mike, it was no longer him alone against the world. But, even with progress brimming on the horizon, the family still suffers setbacks and social disgrace because of their use and abuse of substances.

In the work, I explore the use of marijuana as a treatment for MS, anxiety, alcoholism, anger issues, and cancer. I found myself pulled in several different directions with this project, but ultimately wanted to focus on raising awareness of the concept of cannabis as an Exit drug—a substitute for harder drugs. The coasts of our nation are facing a heroin epidemic, while the middle of the country is still battling rampant methamphetamine use. I meant to fully illustrate the pull of such drugs, without heroin or methamphetamine as a major part of the issues crippling Cassidy’s life: Kayla rats her cousin out in a desperate, angry moment in which
she’s fiending, Toni risks her children just to sneak heroin into the Villa, and Reese dies of an overdose after a 7-year commitment to his sobriety.

Psychedelics are mentioned as a means to an end when Cassidy is making drug money in college, but they are not a focus of my Thesis. In the spirit of appreciating the revelatory possibilities of such psychotropic endeavors, I gave my main characters the surname Millbrook, in reference to the site of the Timothy Leary mansion. My titles are meant to imply a theme for each section, with the overall title Desideratum referring to an unnamed necessity. Veritas, meaning truth—was intended to call into question the very concept of truth, and the reasons behind why we reveal what we reveal to people. John’s truth is revealed to the world, and he spends his life dealing with the repercussions of that on his career, his marriage, and his familial relationships. Ectopia is meant to relay an overall sense of displacement permeating the family—Cassidy’s discomfort and use of substances as a coping mechanism is a result of both her situational psychological burdens and her propensity toward mental illness. Sine Qua Non, or an essential condition, was meant to strongly suggest the benefits of using marijuana as a substitute for harder substances, because section 3 is where we see Cassidy relapse in a dangerous way; a replacement is essential, and marijuana is suggested as the best alternative. And the title of the last section, Neurogenesis, implies the potential for new growth and a hope for cultural evolution—named for the rare ability of cannabis to actually generate new neurons in the brain.

Section 1 is largely focused on John, while Sections 2 and 3 most follow Cassidy, and Section 4 is predominantly family-focused, as they all band together to cope with the matriarch’s cancer. My main characters are, of course, the family of three: Cassidy, John, and Marie. The plot is thick with dissatisfaction and resentment, as it was my goal to create a
marital dynamic profoundly poisoned by one partner’s continued use of the illegal substance. My Thesis is set mostly in New York, spanning 25 years or so, with the largest jumps in time occurring in between the four sections. The exact chronology of the piece is meant to be vague, but I intended to move the story forward swiftly, with only a few flashbacks to slow the story down at times.

My main characters are struggling against bad genes. Substance abuse problems run in families and whole generations tend to fall into the same type of trap. For my characters, it’s the choices they make about their own health and well-being that decides how their genetic disposition will control their lives. My piece was meant to encourage the efforts of my reader to sympathize with disorder on many different levels, so as to appreciate the manifestations of psychological distress driving the movement of the work. Cassidy’s self-starvation was meant to be a depiction of the externalization of her internal struggles, as well as a comment on the progression of mental illness into addictive tendencies; it was important for me to highlight causes for Cassidy’s substance abuse.

John is constantly taking risks in order to maintain his use of marijuana. But why? Why take risks, in spite of how it might impact his family? By John’s continued refusal to part ways with marijuana, I attempted to illustrate self-medication among the working class. Cannabis is important to him, as is his right to smoke it—it’s his version of a beer at the end of a long day’s hard work. I did not intend this piece to be an anti-establishment tirade; I instead intended to highlight an area in which the establishment has been too slow to admit fault.

Marie was a nameless character, simply “the wife,” until I decided to give her a greater role in demonstrating the medical uses of cannabis. She was always meant to be opposed to marijuana, and was intended to represent a general archetype. In the first three sections, the
taboo nature of cannabis is expressed through Marie’s embarrassment over her husband’s notoriety from his court battle. She does not participate in her husband and daughter’s cannabis troubles—refusing to get involved in Cassidy’s rehab stay, or John’s court case. It isn’t until Marie faces her illness that she becomes more supportive of her family’s commitment to cannabis, shifting her into opposition with authority in a way she refused before.

With the inclusion of Marie’s cancer and reversal of her opposition to cannabis, I was attempting to depict the type of change that the entire nation is slowly undergoing with regard to public and political opinions of the illegal herb. She gets through chemotherapy in far less discomfort with cannabis than without it. When Marie is told she can’t drink, she would rather turn to cannabis than pharmaceuticals to ease her pains because of the many side effects of the medications. To contrast her earlier disapproval and disappointment in her husband’s arrest and tendency to smoke while driving, I included a later scene where Marie asks for a joint to smoke on her car ride home from chemo as a means of relief from the sickness she would feel immediately after her treatment.

In the work, we witness Cassidy falling off the wagon several times before actually genuinely attempting sobriety. Essential to the story is John’s ability to recognize the usefulness of the rehab center, despite his bad experience there. My Thesis is meant to explore rehabilitation, and I purposely depict both mandated attendance and voluntary participation. I wanted to contrast the experiences of a casual marijuana user who is forcibly sent to rehab by an uncaring entity whose policy was violated to the experience of a young individual with budding, destructive substance abuse problems. John is quick to send Cassidy to the Villa because he hopes to combat the problem of genetics, knowing the substance abuse cycle can only be broken through self-awareness.
Rehabs are a place where so few people go—the privileged few, in fact. In having John and Cassidy both end up in a facility, I worried I would distance myself from the more common problems of addicts; but, instead, I hope it speaks volumes that John went through that program and came up against the authority there, but still left appreciating the importance of such a place. But one thing may be unclear: why, when she’s already 20 years of age and free to make her own choices, would Cassidy agree to go to rehab, especially if she wasn’t going to fully participate and commit to the path of recovery it offered to her? The answer, unspoken in my Thesis, is that she went simply because her father asked her to.

In addition to the Millbrooks, I also included several minor characters with key roles. I used Andy and Mike as tools of reason and voices in favor of legalization, while I used Mr. Cosack as a representation of current policy and the system that’s already in place. Andy is meant to be a sort of black market ganjaprenuer-- always suggesting ways Cassidy can follow in his footsteps in making money illegally, knowing Cassidy is drawn to risk-taking behaviors and rebellion. The McArthurs provide foils for the Millbrooks; while McArthur continues to rise to power in spite of his drinking and public alcohol-fueled antics, John suffers professional and personal blows from his dedication to cannabis.

I originally intended this Thesis to consist of several separate stories and accounts of cannabis use and the troubles that followed. I meant for each short story or section to stand on its own, but only because I felt that as a poet, I would not be able to tie the pieces together in a way necessary to its ultimate success. Coherency was a major concern while writing; but as it started coming together, I eventually shaved away all the outside stories that would have been too far of a stretch to connect to the Millbrook family. In doing that, I lost a townhall meeting of farmers in California reliant on growing marijuana, all debating how to protect
themselves from unlawful search and seizures. I also parted ways with the idea of a drug raid at the camp in which a dog gets shot, though it seemed like a strong tool for an emotional response and had that ‘ripped right from the headlines’ quality to it. Additionally, there was a short string of bad guys I originally included in this work, but ultimately the struggles I set up for the three main characters were already tumultuous enough and I went in a simpler direction, instead focusing on the story of the Millbrook family.

The overpass bridge I imagined was always going to explode at the end—of that, I was certain because I wanted to encourage reflection on the journey we took from John’s days at the power company to the very end. But what I didn’t realize was how complicated the path I’d carve to get there would become. In the end, they’ve all committed to delinquency and criminality together, and sit with a profound discomfort over the possibility of legal trouble before any of the policy changes that would save them from persecution.

My Thesis hinges on several policy changes with regard to cannabis over the years---the last of which is the recent approval of medical marijuana products in New York. I felt that the legal battle and John’s job loss were important inclusions, considering that we are unavoidably on the cusp of multiple cannabis-related legal battles and court decisions that’ll redefine policy in the years to come. It’s a shame those battles will likely be fought by common men like John—people simply vying for a way to hold onto their livelihoods in spite of their cannabis use. But, as I tried to highlight in my Thesis, company policies will always preside over members of the working class who have to abide by them in order to keep food on their family’s tables.

I weighed Cassidy down with OCD tendencies and overactive fears from my very first descriptions of her as a child, so that the reader would be able to perhaps identify the illness in
its new forms when it blossomed into an eating disorder, and then later manifested itself into substance abuse problems. At the Villa, Cassidy begins to restrict her food again—evidence further of her erroneous, innate quest for control once she no longer has control over entering herself into an altered state.

The moment Cassidy thought she would no longer have a choice in her sobriety, even for an irrational second, she felt compelled to throw herself from the wagon. Here, I meant to make a comment on powerlessness and control in relation to substance abuse and sobriety. I felt it important to include conversations about substance abuse from the perspective of characters still in the throes of dysfunction. Opinions of AA are plentiful; in my Thesis, I was attempting to capture monologues of addiction that would express a wide range of appreciation and frustration with the program, sobriety itself, and the particular rehab center pictured. Rehab leaves Cassidy better prepared not to become the worst version of herself, but her inclination to take risks and partake in shady dealings is still her ultimate undoing.

Legalization deals a crippling blow to crime empires and pours money into schools and local economies; it creates jobs and opportunities, while providing a safer substitute for alcohol and hard drugs. But, it also creates incentive for new, smalltime criminals, such as what Cassidy becomes. The cultivation and transportation of drugs for a fictional large-scale operation seemed an important inclusion in a work meant to explore the contemporary cannabis climate. Recent reports of police misconduct in relation to large sums of cash being detained and disappearing into their underfunded budgets was also necessary to highlight. The current problems with such grey areas surrounding marijuana legislation have repeated themselves throughout history, in that those who yield authority are the people who decide on a case-by-case basis which law-breakers get penalized, and who gets to simply walk away. And
sometimes when potential defendants get to walk away, they’re thousands of dollars lighter if they happened to be traveling with a large sum of money that day.

The piece’s depictions of interactions with the police are meant to vary widely, as they tend to in reality. I designed Cassidy with an inherited resentment toward authority, shaded from a young age by her father’s feelings toward the police and any authoritative bodies capable of committing some injustice against his liberties. Essentially, the Millbrooks have always been outside the normal expectations of society. The very idea of normalcy is meant to be constantly questioned in this work. Labels indicating social deviance were also important to explore, as a reminder that being labeled an “alcoholic,” “addict,” or “criminal” can be professionally debilitating and life-altering.

I’m not sure how Kerouac managed to write On the Road on one long scroll—cut, copy, and paste were essential tools to my creative process in the completion of this Thesis, as it came together as a patchwork of sorts. As fiction is not my subject of expertise, this challenge has not been small. I was attempting to write beautifully about various cruelties. In this work, intention is everywhere—I spent countless hours deliberating over its exact pieces and how they would best fit together. The challenge of remaining focused on the development of the characters I created was one of the utmost importance. I meant for this to be a piece with striking contrasts—like a photograph that keeps your eye.

In my pages, I attempted to present the challenges of a fictional family whose members refuse to abstain from cannabis, despite its continued categorization as a Schedule 1 drug and the potential, life-shattering consequences of breaking the law. I also depict several different fictional accounts suggesting its medical value for a myriad of conditions, including alcoholism and addictions to deadlier substances. In the end, the Millbrook family is left in the same state
of limbo as the entire nation, as there could be no absolute resolution for them in the face of
the continued opposition of the federal government to cannabis reform.
Abstract:

Desideratum is a fictional account of a family of addicts, alcoholics, and cannabis users spanning from the mid-eighties to present time; it attempts to accurately depict a common conflict between individuals within a society and the laws by which they are unable to adhere to due to a biological imperative to self-medicate with addictive substances. This work follows two members of the Millbrook family to a rehabilitation center, and a third into chemotherapy treatment in an attempt to highlight both recreational and medicinal uses for cannabis. It explores the world of illicit drug consumption, cultivation, and dealing amid a contemporary shift in favor of marijuana policy reform.
Veritas

1.

It was again nearing the end of the day. John reached into his bag and set a film canister next to his coworker. His friend looked up and without a word slipped the cylindrical black and grey-topped container into his pocket, then handed John a twenty dollar bill.

John smirked and spoke as the transaction completed, “Hey, Matt—didya hear, they finally figured out what a lethal dose of marijuana is?” He tilted his head back to crack his neck, waiting for his friend to set him up for the punchline.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing, you had to be there.”

“Well, obviously I wasn’t,” the supervisor barked, and turning to John said, “You’re supposed to be upstairs—they sent me to get you.”

“Yes, sir—I’m on my way right now.” John walked apprehensively toward the elevator, looking back at his coworker to share a moment of relief that their joke remained private. He knew Matt smoked—plenty of the men smoked; they’d been working together for years and shared more than a joint or two over that tedious sprawl of time spent comparing stories of
the streets they faced and the dangers they inherited. Metermen: expendable, esurient, street-level footsoldiers—sent out day after day to separate families from the electricity that sustained them, and often met with venomous opposition. At the end of the day they’d compare stories of guns pulled, vicious dogs released into narrow hallways, spit in the eye, Maglites to the chest, gravity knives dropping open...

“Yeah, man—so I was in this demoed building that I should’ve never gone into. I hit the switch and I’m out the door and in the alley there’s suddenly a junky in my face, like two inches away, screaming about the power company. I told him that if he went to get a wrench, I’d turn on every light in the place. When he went to go get it, I ran.”

Newspaper articles detailed apartments in the projects burnt to ash—he’d recognize the addresses from the shutoff list, most of the metermen would. The dead or injured or homeless were struggling to stay warm, to stay alive, through cold winters with unpaid bills and with no gas, no electricity. Children of varying ages crowded on couches and floors all had the same look of oxygen deprivation. Heaps of New York apartment buildings correlated to that list, which John oversaw.

It was all a game, like everything—a repetitive cycle of people not paying their bills up until the point their electricity was shut off, then they sent their checks, and the billing department waited and watched for them to clear before issuing the order to restore power. Families without microwaves or stoves or sometimes hot water had to wait until the next week for their electricity to be restored by the holy meterman. They’d grunt at him when he showed up to do the deed; sometimes it was the same meterman they’d threatened when he originally came to shut them off.
John lived for 18 years in the South Bronx—his days spent in the poverty and the grime and the racism that he was thrust into from birth. Now he was a commuter—one of them: a trespasser in the neighborhoods, an irregular face on the streets, a tourist trying not to choose the wrong corner from which to cop, or the wrong thick, multi-pocketed, bubble jacket to approach. John was the son of Irish immigrants—children of the alcoholic generation; his own father went from the boat straight into a power company uniform, like so many others in those days.

Day after day, off to the same decrepit blocks and menaces. Crackdealers held court out through windy nights and rain and fear of arrests. If one dealer went down, 10 more just like him would pop back up. Meth-heads terrorized neighborhoods on frenzied sprees seeking money to be well. Shoefitti dangled on every corner marking gang triumphs and losses. Silly perverts banged on car windows, shouting out Spanish slurs, all so girls in sundresses would turn around and pay them some attention—the same girls, looking for attention for a far better price than free. The situation was desperate; the people beside you on the street were desperate. And for this kind of desperation, relief was in what they'd put in their veins, or up their noses, or held firm in their lungs before retiring calmly to the gutter. Addicts slithered around day and night—the silverfish of the city; they would climb down from your roof and into your window and wreck the place before leaving with anything valuable. They'd come up behind you and aim for your head, beat you on the street in broad daylight so fast that you’re down before anyone around you had time to react, if they’d react. Even when it left an old man on his back, the addict brain would get its fix.

His family had roots in Ireland, and in a cramped Bronx apartment close to the subway. John was one of four kids: measly farm numbers—but this was America, billed back in the
green sprawls of Kerry as the land of opportunity. He was almost not born at all, as his father was on the boat to America to please his family and become a priest. But, on the boat over, John’s parents met—to the great displeasure of the family who expected John to be the son to ensure their place in heaven. The animosity of the great failed priesthood debacle resulted in lost inheritances, hard feelings, and family feuds that carried on into new generations.

As it passed, the train roared and rattled the room to life in a way that would disturb anyone unaccustomed to it. But, he made do with what he arrived into, and hoped to do better. The trick would always be the conquering of vices, as it had been for generations. Drink drove members of his family to violence, suicide, and madness.

So, John never drank. And he never worried much about his marijuana use, or the fact that it was illegal—at least, not right away. He eventually found himself searching the shadows at night, waiting for secret agents to descend and suspiciously finger a joint in his ashtray before bagging it as evidence of his deviance—his break with the societal pact.

By the late 80’s the crackdown on drugs brought on by a crack-fueled crimewave that stretched into the suburbs meant that only the most ruthless of criminals and dangerous of black markets survived. Weed was hard to get, unless you were willing to hit the streets and buy from strangers. The time of free love and gifted joints was well over. John thought of the scene the night before—his most recent purchase: “Cop and go, cop and go!” a Hispanic man repeated discreetly to a row of disarmed masses.

“Cop and go!”

The lookout walked alongside a line of human cattle threatening to pour back out of the alleyway and onto the corner of 138th Street & Willis Avenue—overflow that almost thrust its
way back into normal society, set to unmask a dirty secret. The usual foot traffic into back alleys cops could turn a blind eye to. It was as commonplace for a person to shrink into the shadows of an alleyway drug spot as it was for hordes of people to be headed for a noon mass at St. Patrick’s cathedral. This many people waiting to score was uncommon, but when there was good Chiba word got around the neighborhood and crowds would form to pick up before it switched back to the regular shit. Primo over ditch, and the rumors hit the street—the lines swelled over and before long 50 people were waiting patiently at a bricked up door... *almost* too many people for the police to ignore.

“Cop and go!”

The waiting crowd rivaled a subway station; the line of people waiting on the South Bronx sidewalk to gain access to a bricked up building could require investigation, and nobody wanted that. The city was too busy to pay this problem any mind—old men’s backs were being broken in Harlem, women were being raped in Central Park.

The man continued to urge the buyers to go about their business after they picked up. Stoners tended to linger, commingle with other stoners, forget they’re outside a gang-run drug op, and pack up a bowl to spark before rejoining society beyond the alleyway.

“Cop and go!”

The building was like so many other dwellings in the area. The front door and windows were sealed with cinderblocks. The obligatory graffiti featured tags over weathered layers of older tags as a statement of both identity and dominance. One tag that was never painted over was a simple rendition of a crown: Los Reyes. The Latin Kings—they owned this spot.
If they were out of weed on 138th Street, you could always head up to Fulton Avenue and see what the West Indians were holding. The entire block was scary—a row of a dozen empty, shelfless storefronts, closed and gated—clouded in filthy windows, neighbored by the burnt frame of a car. Muscle outside meant that there were drugs inside. On occasion, you’d enter the wrong type of line, or even make it into the wrong building. Once you were inside the building there was a man with a gun in his belt and a pile of money at his feet. Before he could ask you to state your business, you say that you were just looking for some weed, and boy are you in the wrong place... wrong time... wrong drug. They probably wouldn’t rob you; you’d exit. Or you’d buy a small chunk of what they were selling, and pretend it was your intention all along.

Lookouts wore parkas for the cold, and to hide weapons. It was an act of faith mustering up the courage to walk past with a nod and go inside. They kept the overhead down with a simple design choice: 1 chair, 1 table—set up for speed and simplicity. The visitor was not going to be staying long enough to chat. There was an exit to the back room behind, and in between stood a curtain-covered man with weed, cash, and a gun. No one had to say “cop and go” here—you just copped, got the fuck out, and you prayed you didn’t spook them. Trust was hard to come by; undercover officers were targeting these operations with a flourish of new arrests aimed to entrap. When undercovers first hit the streets, they were called anti-crime patrols and traveled in huge Plymouths. On the block, they were called ‘bahando’—coming down. If someone thought they spotted an undercover officer in a line to make a buy, word needed to spread to the scene behind the doors to quickly and calmly to shut down. Sending ‘bahando’ down a crowded line would clear the place of anyone lucky enough to speak street Spanish.
If the scene was too tense in the usual alleys, someone in search of tea could head out of the heart of the city and further into the wasteland where every few houses there’d be a Jamaican with dimebags. Long smoke trails exuded from half-collapsed chimneys of homes without siding; on these types of corners, you could negotiate prices.

“Nah, 5 for 20, man,” the kid in the leather jacket and headscarf would say. If he didn’t drop his price, there were other vendors at this flea market—just a few houses down someone else could meet your cost. It was a narcotics bazaar, and capitalism ruled the drug economy. Supply and demand, inflation, interest, etc.—variations of these rules applied. Capitalism is capitalism—illegal drug market, included; it allows for the building of empires.

But mostly they were all just low-level guys, like all the other low-level guys: the patrolmen, the pushers out in the open air markets, all worker bees doing their jobs. Some metermen met up for a beer after work—others met for a toke. But over the last year smokers had been forced to take a vow of silence on the topic around the office. Their bosses introduced mandatory drug testing—securing a new kind of leverage over the workers. Back in the 60’s and 70’s, it was people’s business what they put in their bodies; but with the advancement that allowed THC to be detectable in both blood and urine coupled with the widespread use of drugs by professional athletes, mandatory drug testing was essentially normalized by the late 80’s. Testing became a popular tool for corporations—*Well, you wanna keep your job and we get to call the shots for that.*

Elaborate schemes cropped up everywhere to pass drug tests. If you could successfully smuggle a condom of urine up your pussy and a pin somewhere on your clothing, you’d be all set to be a doctor—always given fair warning before piss tests once beyond the initial med school application. Others preferred test tubes up the ass, pockets of jars of piss,
thawed clean urine sewn to underwear—drugs to cleanse, diets to cleanse, exercise to cleanse, compliant stagnancy to avoid the release of THC from fat cells after long term use. Weed is fat soluble—that causes all the trouble. Any other drug is out of your system with a mad dash, but not cannabis.

More and more the story from every employer became: *We need to know that you aren’t the type to get high, PERIOD.* Random drug testing became standard—a tool that supervisors could use to single out anyone who didn’t fall in line with the company, with policy, and with strategic silences.

At the power company, they always tested in the morning, mostly because the lunch hour was a communal slopfest, and no one could be trusted to come back sober, especially not the supervisors. History had proven the staff doctor to be strict, and she didn’t appreciate any employee who imbibed on company time. She had a string of people fired before the power company employees started protecting their own: *Don’t surprise anyone in the middle of the day.* Testing happened usually once a year, but people who had been caught with a drug in their system before were subject to testing as frequently as the company doctor saw fit.

John took the visitor’s chair, straightened himself in it, and asked, “Is this about the call I made to Social Services?”

“No. I dealt with *that* issue for you.”

*That* issue... John didn’t do many shut-offs anymore—he mostly assigned his men to the more difficult homes. But recently he dealt with a case that escalated to his level because the woman whom they were tasked with shutting off continued to deny them access to the meter in her home. The power company encouraged meter readers to do anything necessary
to get to the meters—break down doors, break windows, jimmy locks... just get the job done. But this old woman was in trouble; he failed to gain entry into her home, and when he went around the back to try and find another way in, he noticed her garbage consisted entirely of cans of catfood. The woman owed thousands of dollars and was obviously mentally ill and living on catfood. John decided to call Social Services and find her some help.

Word of this somehow made its way to the Head of Collections, which sparked a debate internally about just how troubling this was.

“Sir, with all due respect, she was a lady living on catfood and they were going to leave her in the dark.” They had been instructed to cut her off from the meter entirely, leaving a crazy catfood woman entirely in the dark so they could escalate her case into collection.

“You really pissed them off at Billing, John. She was thousands of dollars into us. We don’t appreciate when our customers can’t pay their bills. Now the state’s behind her.”

“What happened to her?”

“She’s been sent someplace; they went in, she was taken away. That’s all I know. That—and the fact that she got out of paying her bill. Anyway, I didn’t call you in to talk about that. We’re promoting you.”

“What do you mean?” John hadn’t applied for anything and was stunned.


“Asbestos? But I don’t know anything about asbestos.”

“We’ll send you on all the necessary trainings.”

“You’re not offering the Manhattan division, are you? I know a lot of people must be moving around over there, ya know... after Gramercy...”
“No... you’re in the Bronx. You’d be in charge of 800 people in the Bronx division.”

“Wow. Well, that’s a hell of a difference. But, well... I just have to think about it because, you know... it’s so soon after... and everyone’s so afraid of asbestos... it’s every headline.” John paused, then repeated, “Full benefits?”

“Full benefits,” his supervisor echoed with a nod and a grin. “And John, ya know, with this—this thing—other departments are getting cut—people are losing jobs instead of lucking into them. I’d hate to see this go the other way for you, pal.” He stood, patted John on the shoulder, and said, “So, I’ll send you the paperwork... okay?”

“Yeah... okay,” John submitted.

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“Well, you can’t smoke anymore.” His wife Marie was the type to not understand all the bother about marijuana; she was always willing to take a toke, but never sought it out for herself or smoked a solo bowl. Since they were 16, John had made the scores; later, weed had to get worked into their family budget. It was an honest, paycheck-to-paycheck life.

He answered with suppressed annoyance. “I know. It’s in the contract that they can test. But it’ll be just like my job now—a lottery, testing once a year. I just wait to win, and then I’m safe for the year.”

“But no more for now.” She held out her coke glass of red boxwine. “Start drinking wine with me instead. Just have a glass of wine or a beer after work to unwind,” she said and then quickly took the glass back to sip from it. Her father was a violent alcoholic, which led her to be either a quite content or weepy drinker, depending on the day.

“I’ll just quit. I’ve done it before. It’s not a big deal.”
“Fine. Cold turkey it. But you always get so grumpy. And you always cheat. Can you really keep yourself from smoking?”

“I can put it down at any time. Just watch me.”

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In 1990 new EPA regulations proved to be gamechangers: No longer will we simply fine corporations, we will arrest individuals for any and all injustices and any gross negligence.

Just as his supervisor had promised, John was sent on all the necessary trainings, which helped him to realize the company’s shocking, widespread, and ongoing disregard for regulations—for the law. Hepavacs, 4000 dollar pieces of equipment, had become the industry standard. But the power company neglected to invest in the new equipment that year, leaving their workers unprotected and their company in violation of the law. Realizing his own potential culpability, John started writing memos with regard to the regulations and the missing equipment; he went on record telling the power company’s Bronx division that they were in violation. At first glance the higher-ups applauded his initiative, but behind closed doors they stewed and mulled over the problem of John Millbrook and all of his concerns.

Everyone knew that overpass was going to explode someday—just before exit ten headed south on the Hutch, it loomed, waiting to kiss truck tops that were too tall. It was a company joke to stay off of it. Take Mill St. instead, they’d warn. Along the parkway there was a cement overpass—an active bridge with a pipeline running through it. The pipeline would be entirely safe if trucks never accidentally invaded the parkway—but people are distractible and truckers are often sleep-deprived, and sometimes it happened, despite the large roadside warnings lining the ramp. John wrote to officially call this pipeline a danger and to suggest they
address the issue before someone got hurt and they were ultimately held responsible. He mentioned the explosion at Gramercy Park; it pushed the Board over the edge.

*Not cost effective to replace at this junction*—was their response.

Eighteen years into his tenure, John had grown accustomed to the newest policy of monthly drug tests accosting all employees; the experience was the most stressful part of his month. He was tested at the end of the month—the last Tuesday. He got in the habit of feeling safe picking up a bag that night or the next day—then he'd smoke the following 2 weeks, and allow himself 2 weeks of abstinence from the herb in order to ensure a negative piss test on that dreaded Tuesday. It seemed like a fair system.

A few weeks after his latest memo with regard to the overpass, one week after his usual testing day, he was told he was on the list of employees who had to report immediately to testing that morning by a man who had popped his head into John’s office.

“Hey, check again, will ya?” he asked, trying to act cool and calm and completely unaffected. “I got tested last week. I’m always scheduled for the last Tuesday.”

“Your name’s on the list again this week, I don’t know what to tell you. They’ve gotta take your sample in. It’s in your contract.”

Upon questioning the doctor about his double testing that month, she replied: “We have the right to test anyone we need to as often as necessary, whenever necessary.”

They caught him dirty. John was to be made an example of—*Look what happened to a supervisor who ran afoul of us*—words that crystallized and hung from end to end of every hallway in the sterile headquarters.
Punishment involved 28 days in an inpatient facility.

“It’s only a month. It’ll go by fast,” he tried to reassure his wife.

“But what am I supposed to do with Cassidy and no car?”

“Well, my mother and sister will be coming up from the Bronx on the train every weekend with groceries. And I’m leaving the car here so my sister can take you on errands if you need. And, hey, if you need something during the week, you’ll get to know the neighbors better, right?” He tried to make light of what had quickly become a desperate situation. More than anything, he just wanted the month to be over, and she just wanted to keep his troubles quiet.

He took a taxi up the long, narrow driveway to the Villa with sweat cresting on his upper lip, and bitter—so bitter. But he was there to cooperate, to play ball—to stay in the game.

At the intake interview, there was an issue. He was told by a nervous man with a 6-week certificate probably framed on his wall at home that he didn’t fit their criteria for addiction based on his answers. He was refusing to admit John to the inpatient program where his employer required he spend a whole month meeting and curing and getting well.

“I’m Jim Cosack. This is my facility. What’s the problem here?” said a husky man with a deep voice, grey hair, and glasses resting on the tip of his upturned nose. The Villa was the first in the state to offer treatment to both alcoholics and addicts simultaneously—optimizing their profit margin. The Villa also had an uncommonly close relationship with the power company, and only began welcoming addicts into their midst once drug testing became a frequently utilized tool in company politics. Cosack owned the market on recovery.
“He doesn’t fit the criteria.” The nervous man obviously wanted the situation to stretch itself into something else—something he wasn’t still at the center of; his hands visibly shook.

“You mean he’s refusing to admit to fitting the criteria. Mr. Millbrook, I believe we both know that your employment is contingent on completing this program,” Cosack reminded him through narrowed eyes over thick-rimmed glasses.

“Listen, I just answered your two pages honestly. What would you like me to do?”

“Well, we don’t treat just for marijuana use.” The anxious counselor passed Cosack the intake forms, growing visibly relieved as he handed off the issue.

“We do now. Marijuana gets you high—it’s a drug. And it is illegal; if you use marijuana, you have an illegal drug habit. And any illegal drug habit is certainly a drug problem. It’s as simple as that,” Cosack declared.

He turned to his colleague. “You know, only a small percent of them are in here voluntarily for weed. It’s the nature of the drug—it makes the user complacent with the problem: ‘amotivational syndrome,’ to be official about it. Fewer marijuana users seek help than any other drug users. That tells me that those are the ones we especially need to help. But denial helps no one.” He glanced back to John. “Well, Mr. Millbrook, you need to admit you have a harmful relationship to substances. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? To start your process of recovery, first you must admit your dependency.”

“But I don’t have a dependency. I’m not an alcoholic. I just smoke weed sometimes. But not all the time.” Cosack’s book sat on the nearby table.
“Mr. Millbrook…” The counselor inhaled deeply and spread his shoulders back before
continuing. “We understand this is difficult for you, but does your marijuana use interfere with
your everyday life?” His voice caught a tickle of a tremor.

John was firm when he responded. “Well, yes. It’s interfering with my life right now—
when I should be home with my family and working. Instead, I’m here.”

“This is simple, Mr. Millbrook. Yes or no?—an honest answer—do you have a harmful
relationship with drugs and alcohol from which you seek relief?”

John almost shuddered at what the answer had to be, and finally said, “Yes.”

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The facilities were shameful—5 people jammed into rooms meant for two; cot beside
cot. The first night, a bunkmate warned “That big fella to your right might roll over in the
middle of the night, and you’ll wake up spooning.”

“Don’t fight it,” another guy joked. They were all sent there by the power company;
they could have formed a gang, there were so many positive tests rolling money into the
program that week.

_We are not in the business of storage. Two to a room. Special attention._ Too many
clients at the Villa risked degrading the level of care they offered. Meanwhile, a walk behind
closed doors at the sleeping quarters and it was obvious that Cosack had maximized his profit
by adding a few unreported beds—clients who paid cash. It made sense that they’d do
anything to avoid a state investigation involving a headcount. Rumors of how eager they
always were to handle things ‘in-house’ circulated from day one—_this guy was shipped out_
after this, or this counselor slept with a broad over in the women’s unit and took a vacation when she was found by her roommate with her wrists sliced open—unreported because they didn’t want any state inspectors wandering through the place, upturning any well-placed rugs.

Time is amplified horrendously in a facility—slow, like molasses, the cement screams of inertia. The others helped to pass the time. John had never seen people so eager to tell their life stories within 10 seconds of standing together in a 2-minute line for the communal bathroom. Mostly he spent the first week resentful and sour at the reality of being locked up with alcoholics—being forced to sit in circles and listen to their stories of fights they started and blows they took, trucks they shouldn’t have driven—girls, parents, friends, dogs they missed and drank for—thirsty nights and bloody mornings.

He shared what he could. Here you are, go ahead. Drink it. My father handed me a drink when I was younger than you now—I was 13. Time to be a man and drink what men drink. His father had poured him half of his own beer into a small glass mug. He recapped for the room the simplicity of his adolescent mind knowing that it meant there’d be less for his father to drink. He recalled how he sipped and watched his father nod with pride before he felt sick to his stomach in a brand new way. Twenty minutes later, certainly tipsy, he was chased through the house by a whiskey-drenched mother for not taking his shoes off at the door yet again. If she caught him, she might beat him to within an inch of his life. He knew well the violent, irrational nature of alcoholics.

But he was tough—so tough, that he prided himself on his physical wellness. It was unusual for John to get sick; but, at the Villa he developed a double ear infection about 12 days into his four-week sentence. The pain was so intense one morning that he knocked on a
counselor’s door—the thin, nervous man who had grown flustered by John’s initial paperwork; now a new look flashed in his eye—the glint of a man with power over another.

“Listen, I’m in pain. Can I go see a doctor?”

“Oh, well, we don’t encourage that,” said the counselor.

“Okay... I get that, I do. But I have—not one, but two ear infections. I need antibiotics. I have insurance if that’s the problem.”

“You see, years of drinking and drugging have taken a toll on your body—you’re going to experience a certain amount of discomfort as your body adjusts to sobriety.”

“Listen, that’s fine for an addict or an alcoholic, but I don’t drink. You know my company sent me here for smoking pot. My ear is throbbing. I just need some penicillin or something—a single trip to a real doctor.”

“You can leave AMA—that’s against medical advice—to go to a doctor if you want, but we’ll have to inform your company of your failure to comply.”

He let it fester. It only hurt when he let himself think about it.

With 10 days left, executives started coming in and watching the AA meetings as part of a tour of the facility, as part of a guarantee to the power company that their staff was in the process of being cured—everyday a breakthrough. John, already a trapped animal, was outraged at the violation—a clear invasion of every patient’s privacy. He refused to go to the meetings for fear of being recognized by a boss, or a future boss, or his sister’s boss, or (worst of all) his father’s boss. More and more men started to abstain from the meetings and demanded that they be kept private: no more tours of our confessions.
“I don’t know what to do, sir. These meetings are essential to their recovery. The program only works if…”

“Yes, yes… don’t quote silly things to me. They are all violating our facility’s policy. And our policies must be upheld—they’ve all signed an agreement. Whose idea was this? We start directly at the source.”

“John Millbrook was the first to bring it up and start skipping meetings.”

“Really, again with this Mr. Millbrook?”

“I mean, he has a point I guess…” The nervous man trailed off.

“Call him in here.”

John was nervous and tried to crack a hello when Mr. Cosack began gruffly, “Mr. Millbrook, I hear you’re yet again refusing to cooperate.”

“No, sir. I’ve cooperated. I’ve done everything you asked.”

“If you want to stay, Mr. Millbrook, start going to the meetings again. And get everybody else to; and we won’t have any further problems, will we? I can have you removed.” He had 4 more days.

John did his time. He went back to the group meetings and talked about being chased with broomsticks as a child or his father’s tendency to lose their dog. There were still men in suits standing in room corners, observing—but fewer than before.

“Look to your left. Now to your right; two of you will not make it—two out of three of you will go back out there and start drinking and drugging and then quickly you’ll find yourselves in a deeper hole than the one that got you here in the first place.” He held his bag an inch from the ground, staying seated only as long as he had to.
Mike Healy, a counselor with whom John had created a certain rapport, spoke up from a corner when the final festivities were over. “You’re going up to Dutchess County, right?”

“Right.”

“You need a ride?

“You’re heading that way?” John asked, surprised. He had painstakingly planned a bus route that ended with a 6 mile walk that would surely extend past nightfall.

“Yeah, actually—I run the maintenance crew at Camp Ramahpo.”

“Wow. I live off of Old Chester Rd. That camp is just a mile from me. We’re practically neighbors.”

Louder now than it used to be when they first moved there, developments went up across the river and separated John’s house from the camp. They made smalltalk about their families. Mike had a son a little older than Cassidy. They exchanged horror stories about the school system and the corrupt zoning board before Mike deemed it the proper distance from the rehab center to say, “You know man, it was a rough draw, you having to go to this program. I listened to you in group and it’s just a damn shame.”

Mike was the only counselor who took John at his word that he didn’t have troubles with alcohol, in spite of his intake forms. The others felt the need to correct him, feed him words, and wait for him to burp out the word “user”.

“Thanks, I appreciate that.” John waited with a touch of dread to see if something as preachy as the mandated daily reflections from Cosack’s book was to follow. After all, Mike was still an alcohol and drug counselor.
Instead, Mike continued on. “I smoke, you know. I’ve smoked for most of my adult life. This war on drugs is a war on ordinary people. And that’s not right. They’re constantly making examples of people because they can. They’re pushing families into destitution—jailing fathers and mothers, tacking criminal records onto cashiers.”

John was stunned.

“Do you have a little time?” Mike asked. “I want to show you something.”

Pulling onto the camp road the worn tires of Mike’s old Honda spat a mess of dirt behind them. They drove a windy private road past a row of bungalows and to a maintenance shed off to the side.

“This all just sits empty during the off-season, when the kids aren’t at camp?”

“Yes, for the most part. The administration comes back early and sometimes holds conferences up here, but never more than a few weeks before everyone ships their kids in for a summer of lake swimming and kosher meals.”

Unlocking the padlocked entrance, Mike smiled excitedly and held the door open for John. As they entered, he was hit with drastically warm air in what he expected to be a drafty old shed based on the outside of the structure. But inside, Mike pushed hanging plastic from a second entryway and ushered John into his very first grow room.

There were rows of plants under lights hanging from hooks digging out of the plastic ceiling. Orange buckets of water and liquid plant solution bottles were stacked in a corner.

“Holy shit.”
“Yeah, I know. It’s a lot to take in. In fact, I’ve only shown this to 4 other people—and one of them was the guy who helped me put this whole setup together.”

“You grow it?” John had almost never thought of such a thing—marijuana farmers were Mexican brutes or city gangsters or those dirty Canadian hippie deserters... but here was a normal, functional guy growing marijuana. A drug counselor, even!

“Is it hard?” John asked, fascinated and looking closely at a tightly formed bud at the top of the plant closest to him.

“Nah, they’re weeds. As long as you don’t insult them, they’ll grow,” Mike answered. “I keep them on a 12 and 12 light cycle, aiming for between 1 gram per watt. It’s the sexual frustration of the plant that’ll lend itself to psychoactivity and make all that gooey resin and those icy crystals we know and love—just be sure to eliminate all males and you’re golden. You need a bloom room where they bud and proper oxidation and air flow in the room—ideally a closed system. I grow indoors to control all the variables. And I handwater—give them that special attention they need, ya know. Too many aspects of cultivating are automated nowadays—it takes the soul out of the buds, I think, to just set a timer and leave them all alone. I like to hang out in here when I have nothing else to do—this may look like a large setup, but it’s more like a microbrewery of weed. The way you were talking about marijuana at the Villa, I knew you’d understand.”

“Is this for real?”

“Absolutely. You almost lost your job for smoking pot, right? That’s what you said in group. Plenty of other people have been backed into the same corner by the same corrupt system of prohibition that’s been in place since fuckin’ 1937.”
“Yeah, but what the hell can anyone do about it?”

“There are so many others out there that society turned into criminals. It’s not supposed to be this way and we know it—and we’re not alone. I’m part of a group: the Secret Society of the Study of Cannabis. It’s silly, but the name stuck and we call ourselves the SSSC. The group started with scientists in Pawling in the early 80s. Most of them were wealthy—you know how Pawling has always been—and then it grew into a collective of participating citizens. There are about 30 of us across the state. I have the space available, so I grow in random cabins during the off-season and help supply as many members as possible. We all share seeds, record our experiences with different strains, and get check-ups every six months.”

“Different strains? Like, stronger strains?” John asked, intrigued. Back in the 90’s only Mexican brick weed was making its way beyond the city, but rumors of new cannabis circulated and thrilled those who longed to press exotic, incinerated flowers into their lungs.

“Yep. From California. But there’s a way to tweak it—to really become a master of what grows; it doesn’t have to be just a handful of seeds and a wish or a prayer anymore. Automation, man—first we have to convince it it’s on a whole other planet—that’s the next wave: 1000 watt high pressure sodium lights and a closed air system. Also, people have been experimenting with using different light spectrums for different strains—lighting the plants for their optimum comfort, so to speak, to bring out the best genetic variations. And like Mendel with his peapod experiments, the goal is to combine and study traits. You’d never believe how many different strains there are—or, how many there were. Hybrids, indicas, and sativas are very different animals.”
“How do you know all this?”

“I needed to, so I learned. But there’s just so much we don’t know because we can’t officially study it. How is it that we’ve been okay with not knowing?”

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The power company had to take John back because he successfully completed his 28 days—it was in his contract. Then, the weekly testing started—that was in the contract, too. Weekly urine tests were mandatory for anyone with a previous positive. He’d go down to the sterile office at the start of the day. He’d fail to produce their precious specimen right away. He’d sit and drink water and read magazines and wait. John had trouble providing samples of this sort for his entire life. He tried to explain this to the company doctor, but she held no sympathy for him.

“I’m not paid to diagnose bladder problems. I’m here to take samples—all day, every day, plain and simple. And I’m busy—very busy, Mr. Millbrook.”

They did this horrendously embarrassing dance weekly; every Monday morning it was the same pacing and trying to produce. If accused of wasting time in the infirmary, which some of the other workers tried to do, he’d point out that because he was management there’d still be the same amount of work on his desk to get done when he was finished satisfying their requirement.

Then, following a holiday weekend—“No testing today,” a staffer announced that morning. “The holiday means minimum staffing.”

3pm rolled around, and John got a call to report to the infirmary.
“We’re sorry, you misunderstood. We didn’t mean no testing for you today. You have a history. We need your sample.”

John took the cup and retreated to the small bathroom to try and provide a sample for the waiting UPS guy. The staff doctor had grown impatient with John’s long hours in her waiting area. His supervisors complained to her when he came in late. Her supervisors felt he was a waste of resources. Their supervisors hadn’t forgotten his official memo about the overpass issue.

She sat, watching him as he drank water and paced, both continuously glancing at the clock. He only had 15 more minutes until 5pm; she had him.

“Please, draw my blood. I just can’t piss. Just draw my blood.”

“Your time is up, Mr. Millbrook, and you’re not in compliance with the terms of your employment here.”

He raced to Montefiore Medical Center and asked them to draw his blood and test it for drugs and alcohol. He paid out-of-pocket and requested that they send the results directly to the power company, replaying with worry the smug satisfaction with which the doctor had dismissed him. His results were forwarded, proving him free from all influences.

He was still fired, after 20 years.

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“Whoa, man. That’s harsh. No, that’s fucking crazy.” Mike offered his sympathy when John went to go smoke with him for the first time since the debacle at the power company.
He packed a chillum of freshly dried, uncured bud—picking around the leaves and simply tossing them on the floor.

John took the device and faced it upward to hit it.

“Yeah... there’s nothing I can do, though.”

“You can fight them.” Mike dandled the piece in his hand as he spoke, smoke rings curving into the air and hanging in a slant of stale daylight.

“No. They’ll squash me.” John was sure.

“But you weren’t positive.” He took a few long puffs of the joint and passed it to John.

“But New York’s a right-to-work state. Which means they have the right to tell you not to come back to work.”

“Yeah, but you followed their rules. Your test came back negative. I dunno, man. I’d fight it.”

“I don’t know. I can’t. We’re sinking as it is without my paycheck,” John said.

“Yeah man, I’ve been there. Making ends meet is getting harder and harder these days. But, you know, there’s a way to keep money coming in while you look for work.”

“Oh, yeah? You got a job for me?”

“Well, I mean, I have a lot of patients and all the weed at the camp is earmarked for them. But sometimes there’s extra, and I also have a lot of—let’s call them patrons—who are willing to put down a good amount of money for the weed we get our hands on. Grow for us, become a participant, and I’ll take care of the rest.” Mike reached into a nearby workbench
and fumbled around in a metal box for a long moment, fingerling clear baggies, until he came up with a pouch of about 20 seeds or so. “Here, take these. Not all of them will make it, though. Know that there will be casualties.”

After the handoff, John picked up the seeds and looked closely at them. “But I don’t know the first thing about all of this,” he said, motioning around the room. “And aren’t you afraid of the government? The cops?” John asked, curious.

“Everyone’s afraid, but if no one acts, we’ll all just stay scared.”

“Well, why did you agree to do this when you agreed?”

“Make no mistake—I’m asking you to risk everything here. If you get in trouble with the feds—hell, even with the town—we can’t step out of the shadows to come to your rescue. But right now we live in a world where an essential system within us that responds to cannabis, the endocannabinoid system, is not even taught to med students. Patients and users are better-informed than doctors because doctors have been denied the ability to study a simple plant that’s been used as medicine for thousands of years, all because this plant has been labeled Schedule I: No medical benefits, highly addictive. A simple change in legislation, and there would be customers where before there were criminals, patients instead of addicts, and a chance against hopelessness.”

Old and young men alike, for years, had conspired against the prohibition—John realized how valuable this invitation to become a part of something bigger truly was. He took the seeds, and Mike offered to help him turn a small room in his basement into an indoor growhouse, just as the maintenance shed was set up.
“It’s important to live your life as you would normally. Smoke how you prefer.”

John became a participant and began to grow marijuana. For the first few years, there were people who dropped by, long surveys issued, and meetings at the Camp. Later it was as simple as a mail-in form once a year. Marie didn’t mind because she never went into the basement, anyway; and to her it meant no more silly scores in the city. She was willing to compromise her home, as long as she got to remain oblivious.

While John secretly grew underground, the world took steps toward reevaluating cannabis. Years later there were protests. Men in wheelchairs sat sobbing and holding signs demanding freedom. Generations stood together on lawns and streetcorners and cement steps chanting. California was the first to legalize the medical use of marijuana, causing more chaos than could’ve been predicted. A wave of panic spread across other states as more and more medical legislation won approval, and federal & state inspections of farms, greenhouses, and dispensaries began in an attempt to cash in on any criminal activity—while it was still considered criminal.

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It was the type of legal battle he never had a chance of winning. His clean urine won over the first judge to see the case—negative result, continued employment—it was as simple as that. John was slated to return to work the following week. Then, quite expectedly, the power company appealed and he was thrown back into limbo. They claimed a urine sample was not provided to the company physician in a timely manner—a violation of their employee agreement. Over and over again he won, then lost.
Support for John winnowed down to nothing; no one wanted to be associated with John’s troubles now that he had gone against the company. Relatives stopped answering phone calls. Friends didn’t call to check up on him as he sat home calculating bills. Even his brother-in-law and longtime friend, Gerry McArthur, stopped coming by to catch up and visit like he had always done every few weeks. McArthur was a beat cop when John was reading meters; he was destined to become the corrupt Police Commissioner of a number of hopeless cities. Years later, McArthur would give interviews on how he cleared meth-heads out of Newark and cleaned up the streets of Boston, but he left a trail of accusations of drunken power abuses in his wake: McArthur threatened an officer, McArthur tried to muscle away his daughter’s speeding ticket, McArthur was taken in multiple times for fighting publically with his wife, McArthur and his brother walked through the streets shooting out streetlights like cowboys... He was a gangster who found his home in the police department; but, at least he wasn’t a pot smoker.

John’s lawyer was affordable, and therefore somewhat sleazy; he swore to John that the Americans with Disabilities Act was the key to victory, and kept sending bills as the appeals rolled on into each new circuit of the US Court of Appeals.

Marie wanted to keep the court battle a secret, but there was no keeping it quiet. His case was published in legal journals and some of the more prominent members of his wife’s family found out about it. The words in the first paragraph of every report, every story on the case: Admitted alcoholic and addict, John Millbrook... No one stood at his side; he brought shame to his family—worse, he contaminated their workplace. He found himself the black sheep for his green habit, until his family found bigger problems in the brokendown brick buildings where John’s younger brother began to seek his fixes.
For John’s brother, it wasn’t alcohol that kept him out at night and missing till
daybreak—it was crack, the plague of the new generation of poor. When crack hit the Bronx,
there were never any abandoned buildings—addicts always found a way in, and crackhouse
real estate was everywhere. John found a need to learn the new layout of his old
neighborhood intimately. Instead of scouring bars, he found himself tracking down his brother
in squalor and alleyways. The worst addicts didn’t cop and go—they copped a squat and
sometimes sat for days half-alive in corners of cold rooms without curtains or furniture or
hope.

Near the end of the last court appeal John would be able to afford, his younger brother
started going missing for days at a time. Crack wasn’t just a plague on the black communities,
like good middleclass folk were told, or upperclass folk assumed staring down tubed $100 bills
to look past their nose and down on crack. Not just a poor person’s drug, though you were far
more likely to get offered a bag on the worst streets—it was a human drug. It fed on
something in everyone, and no one was exempt. Casual users sometimes got away with their
lives—before what was casual became necessary. But with the right genes, the right desire,
the right need—you’d never again be who you once were.

John found himself having to drive south and through the Bronx trying to find his
brother almost every night. He’d arrive home to some alarming bit of information or a last
known location. He’d search the streets, looking to find the right spot. He encountered
cocaine palaces—usually sponsored by the Puerto Rican gangs—with lines of people in
uniforms, heels; women leaning on strollers with plump little legs visible kept their eyes trained
on the entryway—eagerly, hungrily awaiting their turns—great cross-sections of citizens who
could have just as easily been waiting at the post office to buy a book of stamps. These
places were owned by no one in particular—just empty buildings or stores the cocaine proprietors didn’t mind commandeering for a few hours or nights—depending on the weight to unload and how hungry the streets were. There would be white powder at the center of the table, a pile of money to the side. With the money down, the bag got weighed in front of you and away you went—a classy operation that attracted people of every color who were all the same shade of sickness, standing out in the cold together, as though they were all waiting on a bus.

As a child, John never worried over whether his father was alive or not when he trekked off to find him. His father would always be on some bar stool—the center of attention, loudest voice to boom with laughter in the bar. Mostly, John would have to worry about their dog. But his brother had taken a whole new angle down some snake-eyed, unforeseen road.

“Man, you’re in trouble. I don’t want to have to be tracking you down like this, hoping your dumb ass isn’t dead somewhere.” His brother’s grip was weak; John felt himself pulling the boy up entirely alone. It was the first time John stopped to wonder how long his brother had been a junky. He dragged his brother from a stranger’s abandoned, sopping wet couch—the blood on his face beginning to clot, no memory.

When his brother wrecked a car by driving it into a large tree on the corner of St. James Park, he was still as high as John had ever seen him upon arriving at the hospital. Scared he’d lose him to the next inevitable crackbender, John drove to the Villa in the middle of the afternoon to ask for a meeting with Cosack. He stood humbly before him, eyes downcast—prepared to ask a favor.

“Please, if you would help him... he needs to be in here. He’s so young, and on such a bad track... I just, well, don’t have the money right now... you see, they wouldn’t extend me
credit anywhere else... and my brother, well—he’s like the other people in here. I recognize that, even if... even if I didn’t belong here—my brother does. He needs help. And I wasn’t sure where else to go.”

“For him,” Cosack said, they would extend credit, “...at a reasonable interest rate.”
When she was young, Cassidy always waited by the window for her father to come home from work. This is how she came to witness his near-arrest; she was 10 years old. She saw him pull into the driveway, and shot from the window to the screen door to greet him with her typical fury of vigor and excitement.

Usually, she’d wait and cling to her father’s legs once he crossed the threshold; she’d seat herself on his heavy, rubber workboot and wrap her arms tightly around his calf. He’d smile and pretend to struggle, then he’d take careful and exaggerated steps, transporting his daughter into their living room on one foot. He’d lift her sideways before tickling her into releasing her grip on him, and dropping her playfully on the couch. Cassidy delighted in the ritual.

But, that night, he was coming home late—near 9pm—and he wasn’t coming home alone. Her eyes were first drawn to the patterns of the red and blue lights as they stretched and spun along the peeling paint of the family’s picket fence. Then through the rusted screen door, Cassidy saw the officer holding a flashlight into her father’s window. Surprised by the scene, she yelled for her mother and was ushered away by a calm, cheery voice and a shaky hand.

“Daddy needs to help the policeman with something.” The strobe of police lights on the trees made the limbs visible and larger than life in long, crystalized moments, before crashing against shadows all to be nothing again.

“Head to bed and I’ll be in soon,” Marie promised. In the lavender room Cassidy watched two moths anxiously hover around a plastic lampshade, until through a fog of near-
sleep, she heard the familiar creak of her mother's path on the wooden floors. She forced her
eyes open and expectantly trained them on the door. The scene from moments before was
fading. When her mother’s frame filled the doorway she could only think to ask sleepily, "Mom,
why won't those moths go away and go do something else?"

Her mother looked relieved at the question, but the corners of her mouth professed a
troubling weight.

"They can't help themselves, honey. They're drawn to it. They think they're flying
toward something else—the stars, the sun—and then they hit our bulbs or candles instead."

She turned out the light, and came closer to sit on the edge of Cassidy's bed. Outside,
the formulaic drama of the search and arrest would have been unfolding, had John not pulled
into his driveway and immediately exited his vehicle, which was ripe with the scent of illegally
combusted plant matter.

John had smoked a joint on his way from his day of peeling asbestos out of ceilings. He
was followed for 2 miles, so closely that he knew it had to either be a cop on his tail pressing
him to go faster, or a local teenager out to speedrace on the backroads. But there was no
mistaking the menacing vigor of the Ford headlights behind him—pressing him on, inching him
faster & faster ahead, riding aggressively on his bumper around the final turn before John’s
home—all civility rejected.

He threw on his signal and tore up his circular driveway, only to be followed and
sprayed with rotating lights. He was already out of his rusted Toyota by the time the officer
was out of his own vehicle, hand on his gun, demanding John put his hands in the air.

“Officer, this is my home. I’m not sure why you followed me.”
“Well, you didn’t stop long enough for that stop sign over by the school.”

“But, I stopped.”

“Yes, but not long enough.”

“I see. Well, I apologize for that, officer, I do. But I’m sure this scene right here, on my property, is upsetting my family—all in that house, waiting for me.” He motioned up toward the window where his wife held their front curtain open and watched, powerlessly. Their neighbors were nestled at their front window to watch, too—always such good neighbors, always watching out.

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“Why’d you hit your brakes?” Marie demanded.

“It could have been a cop,” John answered.

“But it was just a stopped car. You know, not everybody on a roadside is a cop. You’re so paranoid,” she accused.

The Rockefeller Center Christmas tree was, as always, bigger than ever. John had suggested the trip as a way to relieve tensions in the house and remind his wife of her Christmas spirit: the joy of outdoing the neighbors with decorations, the perfect family photos complete with gourmet meal close-ups, and a tree with presents that extended out further than last year.

They parked close to the action on a sidestreet of which John knew.
“Honey, give me your purse, I’ll put it in the trunk.” Marie held out her hand for Cassidy’s tiny bag, grabbed an additional one with snacks, and put them both in the trunk. Cassidy’s purse contained a smattering of stocking stuffers, Christmas candies, and brand new Polly Pockets—pastel compacts with tiny, perfect people in tiny perfect situations set in plastic.

John didn’t question Marie’s inclination. They were from the city, and you didn’t leave purses in backseats in New York City—hell, you didn’t leave watermelons in your backseat, or someone might’ve seen the value in them. When you’re out or dry or hard up or low down or just plain strapped for cash with an intense burning goal in mind—anything strikes as profitable. They were New Yorkers who retreated to Dutchess, as so many did—but they were not tourists and they hadn’t forgotten what to be afraid of. That’s why, the next block down, when John made eye contact with two out of three young black men standing on the next corner, he kept walking. There was nothing in the back seat and only a child’s purse in the trunk.

Cassidy spent the night making fond memories of a city her parents spoke of, but didn’t often bring her to visit. When they arrived back at the car, the trunk was slightly open.

“Oh my god, did I forget to close the trunk?” his wife asked.

“No. God DAMNIT.” John forgot himself, and the day. “Someone fucking broke into it,” he declared in anger at himself, at the kids who had been standing on the corner, and at the city he had dragged himself out from.

“Well, we have to call the police if we want our insurance to pay to fix it.”

“Yes, we do.” He left them for a moment and humbly requested use of a bodega owner’s phone, but was only allowed to use it once he was able to explain the situation in clumsy Spanish.
When the officer arrived to take the report, he started slashing with his pencil at a clipboarded form.

“Alright then,” he said when he was done getting the details of what was taken. “Don’t worry, it happens all the time in this area.”

“It didn’t used to.”

“Yeah, there’s a lot of gang activity here nowadays. It’s been getting bad.” Now every neighborhood was filled with hapless young men, each of whom reflexively glanced into parked cars to sum up their value as they passed.

“I just need to see your insurance card,” the officer requested near the end of his paperwork.

“Of course.” John hadn’t thought of that. He’d never needed to produce an insurance card before—for which he credited years of being a good driver, disciplined when stoned. Always careful, it was a document to which he gave little thought. Which was why it was in the glove compartment—at the bottom of a pile of papers. John paused to reflect on where his insurance card was, while his wife reached into the glove compartment with a sigh and produced it for the officer. But wedged between the handful of papers she gathered was a roach clip with a 5cm joint still caught in its teeth. The officer stood and watched over both their shoulders as John’s wife produced the papers. It was habit; the officer was trained to be aware of any potential threats, and gloveboxes frequently presented hidden threats.

He and John spotted the roach clip at the exact same time, the metal glinting off the officer’s flashlight as it tumbled to the sidewalk. That moment made the cop’s night, and would
haunt John for years—one was about to call in a favor, while the other was about to be owed one.

“Ma'am, I'm going to need you to pick that paraphernalia up off the ground and hand it to me.”

“What?” his wife asked and squinted at the officer incredulously.

“It's mine,” John declared. “All mine.” He reached down and picked it up, doing as the officer asked; then he began to explain that his brother-in-law was on the force.

“This is all a misunderstanding. I leant my car to a friend and this is all my fault,” John said.

“Sir, is it yours, or is it a friend's? Because it's a crime to lie to a police officer.”

“Please, if you could just radio or call Gerry McArthur,” John pleaded.

John pulled out a PBA card McArthur had given him at Thanksgiving. It was brand new and still shiny. It's your get out of jail free card, McArthur had joked when he handed one to each of his brother-in-laws. Their families had grown up communally—the older generation drinking together just as the newer generation came to do—their families remaining close and the neighborhoods tightknit because they shared similar Irish immigrant sob stories and destructive genes. John could only hope Gerry would support him now.

Luckily, McArthur was on duty on a beat not too far away. He showed up half in the bag and squinted at his sister-in-law and her daughter sitting on a nearby bench, waved widely, then swiftly walked up to where the other officer was standing with his brother-in-law.
“What’s all this? This man is a family man. More importantly, he’s my family, man.” McArthur took a moment to laugh at himself. “I can’t even believe you radioed for me. This is a no-brainer. He says he’s family, he shows the card, why the hell did you make me walk all the way over here?”

“Well, I figured you’d want to do me the professional courtesy of strongly suggesting to your brother-in-law here that marijuana is illegal and he should drop the habit if he wants to keep himself out of trouble.”

Cassidy sobbed herself to sleep in the silence following an argument her parents couldn’t keep from having in the front seat. Her father stood with the policeman for a long time before her Uncle Gerry showed up. Everyone seemed so serious—she forgot it was supposed to feel like Christmas.

Marie finally spoke after saying nothing for a long spell when they got back from the city. “You didn’t close the garage door.”

“Oh, I’ll do it after I finish watching this show.”

“No, the garage door should be shut,” she insisted.

“Okay. And I plan on shutting it soon.” He stayed seated.

“You’re not going now?” his wife asked impatiently.

“Can’t it wait?” He was watching a special on the Discovery Channel.

“No, it can’t wait. I don’t want anybody passing by to look in. Or what if you forget entirely and someone sees the lights when the timer goes on?”
“Who would see the lights from two rooms deep and care enough to even wonder about them?”


“They all have better things to do. You’re just being paranoid. No one cares what’s in our basement. Besides, if they took a look they’d see bikes and junk and the same stuff that’s in every other basement.” His plants were only tiny seedlings at that moment—there was no smell, which to John meant that his activities were safe. Only when the musk made it out to the street close to harvest did John worry over a casual observer guessing at his secret hobby.

“No, they’d see bags of fertilizer and your empty containers of plant crap and all the stuff that you leave just lying around thinking no one will notice,” Marie insisted.

“No one would be suspicious over some bags of dirt. Everyone has bags of dirt. We have lots of flowers. Stop being so paranoid. Please.”

“And, you know I hate when you call me paranoid like I shouldn’t be. I should be paranoid. And you should be paranoid, so maybe I could stop being so paranoid. It’s illegal, John. We’re breaking the law.”

“So I’m public enemy number one when I slow down for a suspicious car on the roadside, but everyone will look at a silly fraction of light and know all of our secrets, is that it? Is that the degree of paranoid I should be?”

“We could lose our home if someone looked in and saw the light at night, or if the power company thought something suspicious was going on with our numbers, or, I don’t
know—what if it starts a fire and burns the whole thing down? Then we have no house because we were growing your drugs.”

*His drugs.* The line was drawn. Truth be told, she was never really behind it—behind him—but she never dared get in the way of it. When they needed extra money, he’d sell to friends, family, and Mike—never strangers.

“What we do on our property in our home is our business,” he said.

“What you do is my business because you’re putting this family in danger. We both could have gotten in trouble for your stupid roach clip. Cassidy could be in protective custody right now or taken away from us. What kind of Christmas memory is that? And then there was that close call with the cop following you into the driveway—Cassidy saw that... what do you think she’ll tell people?”

“I know. And I’m sorry for all that. Truly, I’m truly, truly sorry.” He had been reminded of his recent mistakes repeatedly. “But Gerry helped us, that other cop was just harassing me, and the bottom-line is that we can’t stop growing. Shutting down the grow room isn’t an option. We’re perfectly safe. We’ll always be perfectly safe. This is our home—we’re not running a methlab or a crackden. We’re cultivating a plant—a medicine. We’re part of something bigger.”

“Well, the government wouldn’t appreciate your little farm. Or your little club. And neither do I.”

His indoor grow yielded 3 or 4 harvests a year—depending how ambitious he was. When there was weed, Marie smoked it. While it was growing, she fretted nonstop—growing tired of worrying over her husband’s next big marijuana mistake.
“People brew beer in their basements. It’s the same thing. It’s a hobby. It won’t be illegal for long. It’s a medicine.” John offered his insight calmly, trying to disarm any further escalations of her concerns.

“Right. That’s why you lost your job and constantly risk arrest—constantly risk leaving us how you left us for that month. I was out of groceries and cash on hand with no way to get to an ATM midweek. The ice cream man came around every day like he always does, and each time I scrambled to find quarters in the cushions. Halfway in we were paying with coins from that old coke cup on your nightstand. I started sending her alone and watching from the window, I couldn’t bear to make it seem like it was anything more than the girl buying her own ice cream.”

He cringed; there might’ve been coins of value in that coke cup—rare coins left to him by his father.

Marie continued, “I think he got the message, though, because eventually he stopped slowing down for so long in front of our house. If I distracted her, we’d miss him entirely.”

“I’m sorry. But it’s just a harmless plant—a flower.” John tried to comfort her.

“I’d hardly call it harmless. And it’s a weed.”
Cassidy spent her night watching their dog dying on a sofa; she refused to leave his side, sneaking back out to their livingroom after her parents declared sleep the best thing for all of them. She watched him struggle to breathe and kept her hand on his back, until with one final seizure his eyes rolled back and he was gone.

“For twenty extra dollars, they’ll burn him up alone,” her mother said.

“Yes, that option. Of course...” John’s eyes were red from crying, but a hint of self-medication crept in at the corners of his mouth.

Her mother said ‘burn him up’ as though she dealt with disposals of that sort on a regular basis.

They all sat together watching mindless television, living above the dead dog below. That night, Cassidy went downstairs to smoke a secret cigarette in their garage, avoiding the cold. She went looking for the tupperware container that she had to help her father place the dog into that morning—a more difficult task than they anticipated because of the rigor mortis that occurred in the night. The pet crematorium place wasn’t open again until the next day. She’d never seen anything other than a goldfish dead before; she’d certainly never seen anything die—there one second, then biting its tongue and gone the next.

He was in the potato room, an old cellar downstairs; when her grandfather was alive, he kept potatoes in there. Cassidy hadn’t been in the potato room since she was a child; she was 16 now, and felt the urge to cry and say goodbye privately.
But there was a peculiar, seemingly deliberate, blocking of the room. She had to climb over a number of bikes and lawnmower parts—it was a dangerous endeavor. When she crossed the strange barrier, the container was outside the room, and an old towel with a faded buttercup that Cassidy vaguely remembered going missing from their bathroom cabinet long ago was rolled and oddly jammed under the door. She debated letting it stay that way, but her curiosity got the best of her. Her parents were hiding something together—her mother would’ve missed that towel. She kicked it away, letting a strange light jut out from inside. A moment of hesitation gave way to her earthier senses, as she smelled the musk of something familiar seep from the doorway. She turned the old wooden handle, and to her great shock there were about a dozen 1-foot tall marijuana plants thriving under a single, long bulb.

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Cassidy was born into catalepsy and began as a sad, frail thing. When she was a baby, she cried all the time in colicky misery. When she was a child, she would walk around their house holding mirrors flat in front of her in an effort to escape into fantasy from gravity. The shifting delicacies of growing up and aging into her adult self were the most difficult of subtleties to master. She grew up always afraid. The quiet at night made her more nervous—when the unlit corners of the mind could race. She fretted at every creak—worried that the house was haunted, or that someone had broken in. A girl so afraid of her own shadow that she'd rather lay down on top of it than face it—she was in need of distractions. She had little control over how she took life—things took her, and coping was never easy. Relentless childhood nightmares turned to time spent alone nervously nurturing the unwell fibers she just happened to be cut from, and then the world crept in: the great addiction monologues of the generation were on the pages every day—every model’s commitment to starvation, to
perfection—every girl’s propensity to desire what she had or, rather, what she lacked—to worship it... the relapse cycles of the soul, the great trash heaps of uneaten dinners, embracing the disordered identity, walking around in the fraudulent fog of normalcy while facing a multi-system failure, indulging lonesome rituals of abnormal behaviors—always counting.

In the awkward time of adolescence, she ran up and down staircases relentlessly, worried over lipgloss calories, wore a belt from TV that promised to electrocute fat, and found herself purchasing ephedra diet pills from gas station counters. The obsession is never about the thing you obsess over; it’s about control, and she never had much.

Then one day, as all the shriveling girls do, she simply refused to eat. She spent her time determined, starving, counting & submitting to circular, maddening thoughts—wrought with compulsions that went unnoticed and unchecked long enough to root in deeply.

"You have to eat if you want to leave the table," Marie said one night in no uncertain terms. She looked at Cassidy’s neatly stacked plate, only a few small bites taken.

"But I’m not hungry. And I don’t like when the chicken’s so fatty." Cassidy pulled a piece of fat up off her plate, dangling it as evidence.

"I don’t care what you want. You’re so thin. You’re almost nothing. The neighbors are talking. Everybody’s noticing. They think you’re sick. Now eat. You can’t be so particular about your food. Try it: it’s good," Marie insisted.

“It’s very good. Your mother worked hard to make you this meal,” John added.
Cassidy couldn’t fathom which neighbors would care if she ate her chicken and greenbeans. She assumed, quite comfortably, that she would be exactly nothing to everyone—unworthy of any consideration.

Voices were raised at her intolerance for necessity and Cassidy left their table crying.

“You can’t push her like that,” John said to Marie once Cassidy was gone.

“But she always cries when we’re just trying to talk to her—to ask her to eat. A person shouldn’t cry so much. Why is she always so upset?”

“She’s not a person, she’s a child. Children are unhappy sometimes.”

“But always unhappy?” Marie asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“And she’s not a child, she’s a teenager. My family is starting to ask if she’s okay.”

“She’ll be okay. This is all just a phase.”

“You’re probably right.”

But her adolescent preoccupations were turned on their side when Cassidy stumbled onto her father's secret in the basement. Knowing then how invested they were in breaking the law, she lost a certain respect for her parents’ authority. Realizing then what had been hidden from her as a child, her eyes were finally open.
“A family who smokes together, stays together,” John joked, as he passed the joint across their laundryroom to Cassidy. John’s secret was out with only a few weeks before Cassidy went to college.

But the news each night told of arrests—parents and children at opposite ends of a telecast and dragged further apart as the newscaster revealed their heinous crimes—meth, crack, coke, dope, grass... the difference seemed to matter to no one. And with each passing day Marie’s worry grew thicker, as she felt continuously threatened by liability, culpability, jail time, fines, homelessness—all because of some silly plants her husband decided at age 16 he never wanted to be without for very long. It seemed to her that John was always plotting ways to grow more weed—stronger weed—it was all too dangerous.

They lounged on the broken furniture of their rundown Dutchess home, worshipping the isolating herb their whole life together. She had never packed a bowl to smoke alone, nor had she ever worried over finding pot—John always took care of all that.

Marie turned her nose up at marijuana and pulled her boxwine trigger daily. She bloomed into the perfect example of a modern alcoholic housewife: her lifetime commitment to Days of Our Lives, unopened specialty knives ordered from TV and still unpaid for, her internet chatrooms throwing her back to lonely people who shared the same block in grade school. People overwhelmed her in high doses with their opinions and glances. Once after landing a job at a nearby lumberyard, she stayed in bed for weeks calling in sick—complaining about her head while calling hotlines under the covers ordering grills and face creams and decorative pieces for Christmas. She always disapproved of the smell on John’s pillow from his hair and commanded that he keep his pillow on his own side of the bed, so as not to offend her. She had more resentments than she could ever know what to do with in one lifetime.
Marie couldn’t stop herself from drinking past the dinner hour. One glass turned to three, which then turned to upset over everything that had gone wrong in her life. She’d make drunk phone calls to relatives complaining about this & that and how things were—overly charismatic and slurring slightly.

Marie came home one afternoon to a smoke-filled house, carrying a caged parakeet. She’d sit and watch it, endlessly entertained and cooing at it through the thin metal bars, confiding in it all of her amounting disappointments.
It was a new day—filled, as each, with equal amounts of poison and promise. Cassidy arrived at her small, upstate NY college with her parents in tow—tabula rasa. Her suitemates were all sophomores—already situated, sure of themselves—certain of their drug of choice: a hippie who usually had a joint lit, a pillhead with downers to spare and a prescription habit she inherited from her mother, and a cokefiend whose father frequently came sniffing around for speed or pot—whatever he could get. It was the perfect setting for Cassidy to try everything once.

The nights took on a magical glow of experimentation and her college experience was hoisted up by extreme and frequent chemically-induced bursts of alteration in consciousness—groups of people tripping, binge drinking, riding the slopes of ultimate sensory overload for days at a time without sleep or consideration to stopping. The hallucinating masses, snorting bathsalts and smoking spices—student loans subsidizing cigarettes, psychoactive substances, and feeding the diverted, stunted attentions of blossoming addicts who lacked a healthy fear of poisons, and instead laid out the tools for new trips, salivating at rattling pill bottles between desperate, nervous glances toward a cure—standing at the very beginning of the constant quest to stay well. They were young and only interested in pressing hard against limits to see what would thrash back at them, what would break them.

Cassidy, like many drug addicts, was never comfortable in her own mind, her own skin. She sought the breathless cough of the best high—the closer you are to losing yourself entirely, the better the euphoric lens, gnawing towards the ungraspable tail of the idealized altered state—armored from all the normal stops at stations in life by the endless fascination with fleeting states.
“Like this?” Cassidy crushed a pill beneath a dollar bill with one hand and held the edges firm with the other.

“Yep, that way nothing gets out. Make sure to crush it enough. You don’t want any big pieces. But any big chunks you can get with the credit card you scrape the dollar and set up the line with. Then, of course, you lick the edge of the credit card.”

Cassidy’s roommate had supplied the orange pill. She didn’t mind giving the lesson—she was tapping into a surplus of stockpiled Adderall. All it took was a twist of a wrist and a well-placed, sturdy item.

“Eww. Lick a credit card?”

“Oh, believe me... you’ll do much worse.”

To be a drug addict, you have to be disgusting —filthy habits come with the territory: doing lines off of countless unclean surfaces, picking drugs from your nose and eating it thankfully, coughing up excess powder with brown phlegm and swallowing it back down. Soon she was the ungrateful fiend of colored powders and medicine balls crushed flat, delighting in the mixing of concoctions of poisons in search of pleasure—always seeking to correct that old, infertile imbalance.

When the pills were gone, there was always another drug to run to—to find shelter in; it was all a matter of availability. She set up shop with new substances until she found the place she didn’t want to leave, then she dug her hole, laid herself in the ground, and smiled up out of it. Addiction knew her innocence, and how to feed on it; her brain was changed long before. Addicts crave as naturally as the body craves salt—the same neurons cry out for substances.
“Do you see the carnival outside the window?” she asked one of her suitemates on mushrooms one night, watching the lights of passing cars burst into stars in the glass porch windows. She sat, frozen, until the words formed in her mind: *I have to go to a whole other galaxy to feel alright.*

She found herself on frenzied group trips to the city—the drug capital of the state, and the only place where the default bag wasn’t Mexican brick weed or the rarer, though abundant, Canadian beasters. They’d ride 400 mad miles in the rain with half-strangers, fingerling drugs while driving—packing bowls, gathering powder, unfolding makeshift paper envelopes of pills, doing lines at noteworthy speeds, all for the adrenaline of rushing into dark corners headfirst.

One such excursion, they didn’t realize that they were being followed by a highway cop with a desire to pull them over. They kept driving at a healthy 90mph—excited for the madness the weekend promised. More cops joined, and before long a hunting party had formed by the time the middleseat passenger looked back and realized they were the focus of what had quickly become a multi-police vehicle highspeed pursuit.

_No Sir, we don’t have any drugs; we just did all ours. Hey now, though—I bet you know where we can find some more—is what the two sustained only on Captain Morgan & traces of amphetamines might’ve asked, having stayed up the night before on mounds of coke that disappeared and left only legal ways to scratch the itch of withdrawal. One passenger had insisted on eating acid for the car trip; he was obviously not invested in the immediate situation, but was enamored with the sheer number of spinning lights that had built up behind them._
Dana and Cassidy were only stoned. There were no drugs in the car yet, or else they all would have taken greater care not to let an agitated police escort go unnoticed.

The scene was far more tense than the usual highway cattle roping. Six officers rushed the car, guns drawn, asking if they had any weapons. And then, “Out of the vehicle!”—hands up, of course.

A chubby officer with a flush across his stubbled face said, “Goddamnit! For all we knew, you could have been violent criminals. Instead you’re just a bunch of dumbass college students, aren’t you?”

“I’m sorry sir, I didn’t see you. We didn’t see you.” Dana pleaded stupidity as they all tried to muster their best grade-school looks of innocence.

“Do you have any warrants?” he asked, and she shook her head No.

“This license is gonna come back clean?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“We assumed you had warrants. People usually refuse to stop when they have warrants. Someone could have been hurt. We clocked you at 93, and it is unacceptable not to look behind you as you drive. Stay here.” Under his breath he said, “Stupid fucking kids,” as he walked back to his car.

The other troopers departed to find bigger fish for their roadside fry, and the remaining officer finished and handed Dana her very expensive ticket. The car was silent at first when they rejoined the highway, until the passengers one by one started to roar with laughter at their obliviousness. Cassidy and Dana’s traveling companions promised they’d pick something
up in the city that they could turn around and use to pay the ticket so the trip could continue unimpeded.

When they arrived in the city, the drugs were waiting as promised, courtesy of a dealer from Staten Island that some random acquaintance went way back with. She spent a blurred night at a hotel party wearing ridiculous hats owned by strange boys—they robbed her of a clear mind—the tides drew her in, caught her in the buoyancy of the latchless, elated spirit.

She awoke most mornings with a healthy appetite for a newly copped bag. Flies on the ceiling, blood on the walls, roaches in the couch cushions, algae in the shower, mold in the sink, bedbugs in the mattress, scabies under the skin, nail clippings in the carpet—strange men with cut drugs rolling over next to her, taking up too much space in her bed. She didn’t care.

Stepping out of a NYC motel with a brain perceivably less capable of orienting itself—the echo of nitrous oxide still resonating, she set into the crowd to meet Dana at some deli she struggled to navigate toward.

“My head hurts like a bitch,” Dana complained, when they finally met in front of the cornerstore they’d agreed upon. Dana was driving them back upstate, but first they had to visit Dana’s dad and drop off an ounce she had left the party early to go secure.

“I’m sorry. Do you want to skip staying with your dad and meet up with the guys, instead?”

“No, I have to see my dad. He’s counting on me.”

“It’s cool that you and your dad smoke together,” Cassidy offered. Parent-child chill sessions were rarer than one might’ve guessed among middleclass Americans; her family’s constant casual drug use was far from the norm.
“Well, we kind of have to. It’s just pretty annoying he doesn’t know where else to get weed. I’m so far away. It helps that those guys are always coming back here to do drugs, buy drugs—or whatever.”

“Ha, yeah. They’re crazy. They were still sleeping when I left.”

“I can’t believe I got that fucking ticket.”

“Yeah. I can’t believe none of us looked back once.”

Dana’s father had MS; the pot helped. He lived in a small apartment on the north shore of Long Island. There were stacks of books everywhere and two parakeets going on about something in a cage in the corner.

“I’m just going to give this to him and we can throw on a movie and crash for a little bit longer.”

“Okay. Tell him I say Hi.”

“I will. He’ll probably be up and about in a few hours, or tomorrow. I wasn’t able to make it back down last weekend for him, and he’s been out of pot, so he’s probably in pretty bad shape. He’ll just need a little time before he’s social again. But he’s excited we’re here—I bet he’s planning breakfast and everything for us tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry he can’t just get some in California or somewhere if it helps him. That’s horrible.”

“Yeah. His doctor even told him to move to another state. He gets really sick on the other treatments they’ve tried. But, I mean, my mom’s gone, my uncle’s the only one other
than me who can take care of him and check in with him, and he’s not leaving Long Island anytime soon.”

“God, imagine a doctor telling a patient to move to another state to get a better treatment if it didn’t involve pot. People’d be pissed off—Facebook petitions would circulate.”

“Yeah,” Dana agreed. “It’s not fair.”

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Cassidy was restless before dawn that next morning while Dana slept—reluctant to risk wandering around the house in case it would disturb Dana’s dad. When finally there was some movement from her friend, she burst out brightly, “We should get up and chase the sunrise.” They both fancied themselves photographers.

“Meh, not today. Too nice out. When there are no clouds in the morning and the sun comes straight up—those are the most boring sunrises of all—not worth the trip. Clouds make for the best scenery shots. Besides, will all the sun shots at magic hours be worth the cataracts in the end?”

“You take good things and turn them morbid. I love it,” Cassidy laughed. “Do you think your dad’s up? I don’t want to bug him by being too loud.”

“Oh, yeah—he’s probably feeling better by now. It was good stuff.”

Practically on cue, her dad entered the room and said brightly, “Hi girls, good morning. How’d you s-sleep?” His MS pushed him to stutter some times, and shook him involuntarily at others.
The girls just smiled and Dana answered, “Great, Dad. Thanks.” Dana’s mother died of a brain hemorrhage before Dana reached her teens—her father was all she had, and he was sicker every year. When she was in high school, they fought horribly. Dana even moved out for a year. But they only had each other, and as she got older and her father’s MS progressed, she was more alone after every visit home.

They made small talk with Dana’s father and Cassidy passed around a paintedglass pipe filled to the brim with weed. They smoked and spoke about simple things like school and the weather and the news around town.

Later that day the pair walked to an empty ball field by the Long Island Sound and shared a joint on the docks. They didn’t need anything in particular to do—the thrill of smoking in a public place was the focus of the moment. Soon they picked up the boys in the city and headed north to keep their party going—this time, they all occasionally glanced over their shoulders as they sped on.

Cassidy quickly found a place to fit among the drug users and abusers. She met all sorts—some, like the cartrip benefactors, seemed to think money was no object and went on mad benders of multifaceted experiences. Some liked to dance with their drug—flirt with it a little—pack a bowl and let it sit, buy a pill and save it for a special occasion, get an eighth and forget to trip before too much time had passed and the poison fungus was rendered questionable. Certain drugs caused a frenzy: when lines went down, they went quick.

It was simple; a shot or two before an outing helped to calm the nerves; Cassidy joked about Irish coffees and 80 proof breakfasts. She found herself swigging from bottles earlier and earlier. It all swelled around her, then surged—and by the urge, she was left adrift.
She met Andy on a sunny day that called for rain. He was standing on the stone rim of the fountain at the center of the small town, looking tall, dark, and unwashed as he poured an organic soap into the water and natural suds started to form as the water cascaded down.

“Might as well beat the frats that pour all those harsh chemicals into the fountain every year.”

The statue was a bear, and every year a slew of pranks were played on the inanimate object at the center of Main Street—marking a sort of war declared on the townspeople by the students. But, like any small, collegetown community—the school sustained the town, and everyone had to find a way to get along. Villagers could only hope that newer groups of freshmen would start coming in more mature, more subdued. There was a real problem with drunken idiots running around the town, acting like they owned the place—at this, the neighbors were not amused.

Andy, a history major and part-time activist when drunk, decided he had to save the water supply with his heroic all-natural, ultra-expensive suds. Most days, his mind was absent of consequence; that day, he was more out of touch with reality than usual. Whatever day it was, Andy would just act. If he wanted to throw a liquor bottle into a street—he’d do it. If he wanted to kick a cop car, he’d make sure to cause damage. And if he felt at all volatile while on alcohol, everyone around him knew he’d eventually explode.

Andy sold a lot of different drugs to all types of people, but his passion was for pot. He had been a crusader for marijuana ever since his mother, worried her son was too involved with the devil’s herb, called the police on him. He used to be an angry child—always so angry.
Then, when suddenly he grew into a calm teen, she knew it must’ve been the drugs. All she needed to hear was a rumor from another concerned mother that maybe her son had sold her daughter a bag of marijuana. The call was easy for her to make.

They came into his room smiling at the sure thing—*No warrant necessary: search done at the request of the property owner.*

“George Washington smoked fucking pot, man. I mean, fuckin’ Thomas Paine used our hemp reserve as proof the nation could tell those British fuckers to get lost,” Andy said.

“Really?” Cassidy asked as they all stood in a circle and Andy ranted, bogarting the joint—waving it to make his point.

“*To have hemp in your pocket, man: to have weed is to have luck on your side.*” He had picked up the quote from a book. “*Mushrooms, too,*” Andy went on, “*which I have for sale if you need, by the way. But it’s all from the earth, man. If I want to grow a fungus and poison myself with it to see some fun colors and maybe have a personal revelation every so often, well goddamnit, the founding fathers would’ve wanted it that way.*”

“Haha. You’re a History major, right?” Cassidy guessed.

“Yeah. I would’ve done Poly-Sci, but all the entry-level courses were super early in the morning.”

Cassidy took a long pull of a paper joint Andy passed to her in the shelter of a stranger’s doorway, then another. When she spoke again, she was distracted. “I’m an English major—I just kind of show up with papers. But I’m so sick of cramming and writing about semester-long stuff at the last minute. I need for school to be over; I can’t believe I have another year and a half of this.”
“You bend until you break, man—gotta flex. Be flexible; we are the universe’s way of experiencing itself... you are the experience.”

“I have like 3 papers due in 2 days. Fuck. ...Wait, what?”

“Don’t stress. The deck’s stacked against you. Don’t worry about it.” Andy had a frustrating habit of going off to another plane, but she didn’t mind the extra effort to try and reach him. He was a safe friend; he had a girlfriend in California and wore a bracelet with a large, flat shell with her photo printed on it.

“I’ve gotta get my shit together,” Cassidy grimaced at her own setup for failure, out of nowhere.

Andy just smiled and said, “We're all a lifetime away from getting our shit together; life isn't about what you want, it's about not wasting your time on what you don’t want. Maybe you just need to get a new plan.”

“Like what?”

“Well, hey... nobody knows this yet, but I'm leaving town. I'm finally gonna go out and be with my lady in California, man—smack dab in the Emerald Triangle. But do you know what you'd be perfect at?” Andy smiled.

“Ha, what’s that?” she asked, already following.

“Take over my business for me when I leave. I'll just set you up with my connect and you might find that with more money coming in, you have more shit together than you thought.” He hadn’t announced his departure yet—well aware of the vacuum he’d create with
his sudden absence. “It’s a great gig and you’d just walk into it like that. You’ll see—we’re like the heart of this town; we beat and everyone else knows this place is alive.”

The weed guru, perched up in his corner apartment overlooking the center of town, gave Cassidy his throne. All he had to do was pass along her number to his clients and his dealers and it would be a smooth transition. And Andy was off to California to see what he could make of the Green Rush.

The first time Cassidy picked up from Andy’s connection, she was nervous. She pulled into a full parking lot, blocking in all the cars, as she had been told to do.

“Don’t mess around looking for parking—they hate that. Just park in the middle of the lot and go straight in. They’re not leaving any time soon,” Andy laughed.

Cassidy didn’t understand what he meant until she entered the house. It stood on the corner of an unremarkable road close to the campus. In it, hundreds of buds sat in stacks of buckets and on drying nets. Cut branches were suspended from wires filling every room in the small house with barely any furniture—just plants and grow accessories.

They passed her a blunt while she waited for them to weigh her out 2 pounds.

“Strawberry?” she asked, a little surprised at the flavor stinging at her lips and throat.

“You know it,” said the large bald man Cassidy assumed was the owner of the blunt. When he punctuated with a smile, he had one tooth missing at the corner of its curve. She smiled back and passed it after hitting it fewer times than the 3 men she was smoking with. The best dealers smile and slithered through the world in their camouflage of the ordinary—these men would’ve looked out of place and menacing on a subway, they certainly knew not to gather outside and have a few beers, for fear of garnering attention from families fed up with
reckless students renting too close to their homes and playing their beer pong shamelessly in enclosed screen porches.

She had never seen these men on Main Street or on campus—or, at least certainly not all three together. She probably would’ve run into one of them at the local Farm Supply store if she stopped in frequently enough. These men would be immediately picked from a lineup and asked to surrender all their oversized gold jewelry. But with her innocent look and calm exterior, Cassidy would be the last one pegged as a drug dealer; they seemed to understand and appreciate that—that’s why Cassidy was there, at the center of their secret operation set so near to a state-funded college campus and across from a church. And Andy was right, Cassidy would have been the perfect dealer—had she not been an addict.

Cassidy inherited the town; she transitioned from street level to middle man smoothly. She spent one very productive, coked-out summer selling ounces of mushrooms, in addition to pounds and pounds of weed. Cocaine on all her legal tender—middle school lunch money everywhere still caked with the junk she was too busy to scrape off.

She got her mushrooms from a guy named Sliker who grew them in his basement with a kit he bought on the Internet. Magic mushrooms were easy to grow, but no one wants to trip every day, so the market outlook was grim, and it remained a specialty item. He insisted in talking in code; when she wanted to make a buy, she would text that he’d left his sweatshirt over her house. Sometime that day he’d knock at her door, or would let himself in—arms flailing about to announce his presence, making the bold motions his state of inebriation called for.

She’d pay $180 an ounce and kindly sold $35 eighths to her friends. Once she sold an entire ounce at wholesale price on the agreement that the client would trip until the ounce was gone. Everyone thought it was a hell of a thing to see—a grown man, a rather chubby one,
completely out of touch with reality for 3 straight days. On the third day, he worked a shift cooking in a Denny’s kitchen; upon his return, he promised that absolutely nothing had gone right.

Cassidy used the mushrooms only a few times while selling them, and found that they helped her to come to several important conclusions about her life; but the turning stomach of a brand new mushroom trip—the quality of the sound around her changed to a dull humming, a sensation of being trapped... tripping was not for her. So instead she smoked and drank and snorted things to turn off her mind.

Everyone trusted her product, and her bags were always fair. She held a side job at a bakery, so with most purchases customers got a free end-of-the-day bagel or bag of rolls. She kept her ounces in a wooden breadbox that her mother insisted on sending to college with her; it was once owned by a dear Great Aunt.

Some dealers insist on penning the strain of weed on your ziploc, while others throw nugs in cigarette wrappers and call it a day; in college, when you have your choice of drug dealers, you go with the girl who gives you a fair bag and sends you off with a bagel.

She lived in a well-kept place across a cul-de-sac from the mayor’s light yellow house; in that town, soft yellows seemed to signify money—all the most important people lived in houses adorned in yellow: the mayor, the dean, the frat house with the fewest date-rape complaints against it—yellow was the closest shade to gold modesty would allow.

Cassidy owned the drug market; money walked through her door all day, and her nights were spent emptying bottles to proudly fill shelves in her kitchen. When you’re a highly functional addict, the lines blur between what you think you can get away with and what you
can actually get away with; when you mistakenly think you can still fool everyone, then you've gone too far.

The summer was a successful swirl of money and psychoactivity and sprawling out drunk in early Sunday morning streets. Treading water like a trapped bug—dreams and half-memories alone could not discourage her virulent urges. Plotting out little deaths, looking for that other universe that made her feel how she craved—if the world was ending, she wanted to be asleep for it. There were vodka bottles in her clothes hamper and she walked around most days unaware of what she had done the night before—never knowing what was done to her, never able to fully account for lapses in time.

Cassidy’s memory began splitting in two; she could never have both pieces. But she didn’t waste her time wondering if some grand moment of human connection passed and she had forgotten—instead, she worried she was drunk through the most important opportunities to make a sale.

When fall came nothing changed as it should have; customers would come back the next day and recap how wasted she was the night before—how she could barely weigh out their bag. Money and drugs started going missing. She had gotten sloppy, but was dealing in higher volumes than ever before—it was a dangerous combination.

Like watching a rabbit in the grass—addicts don’t realize when they’re under observation; they have other things on their minds—like fixes and phone calls and the chase of a new bag, another high, some nonspecific potentiation, or the drink that’ll finally fix them right. Her weakness wasn’t hard to spot—she was coming apart.
It was the kids—the high school kids—the twins; Cassidy knew she shouldn’t have dealt with them. Thieves on the street, but highly respectable sellers on ebay, she sold to them as a favor to an acquaintance. They liked to hang around to smoke after they picked up, probably because they still lived with their folks. They had big, goofy smiles they were quick to flash. She felt at ease around them—like a kid again.

Once she let them borrow her scale to weigh out a few bags for their own customers, and she was horrified to turn around to find one of the twins spraying the weed with a tiny bottle of cleaning fluid.

“What are you doing?” she asked, in disgust at the sacrilege.

“Just giving our customers a little extra buzz.”

“Dude, that’s not okay. It’s good weed.”

“They’d think it was bad. Shit—come on, lay off—by now, they expect the extra high.”

Into every bag a little shake must fall, but with that desecration entered into evidence, Cassidy reconsidered her business associations with them. But it was too late to sever ties amicably.

As she approached her apartment one afternoon after working all morning at the bagel shop, she realized with alarm that the door was already open and a shard of broken wood lay on the ground. A strong burst of a sideways shoulder was all the old door needed to tear open. The breadbox was empty; the money and drugs were gone.

Her first concern was that she had to tell her father about the break-in. A week before, he had visited—some might even say he was seeking the college experience. He spent time at a party her neighbor threw, spoke to a very close talker about something called the Salt Cure
with a look of pure discomfort on his face, and smoked with her friends. When he was there, she handled herself well while under a lot of different influences moderately, but now she would have to admit that she didn’t have things under control. Two ounces of mushrooms, 5 ounces of weed, 10 hits of acid, her two personal doses of mescaline, and thousands of dollars: gone.

She went on a bender of dangerous proportions—never knowing whose head she was in—her own, or the drug’s. Days began to blur... blink, and the nights turned endless... three days since she remembered last sleeping, or wanting to... each new hit accompanied by soft tingles as her brain began to work as she believed it should—as it now believed it should, under the glow of another day’s surrender.

Close acquaintances stopped off to smoke bowls and eventually asked in their own ways: *In the end, will it be worth it for you to die for these drugs, these feelings? Will the things you did while feeling this intense matter more than having more time?*

The day he came to take her, she woke from a cocktail of codeine, ambien, and cheap vodka to see him standing in the doorframe. There was a 21st birthday party going on adjacent to them. Dana, far more sober than the others, was already seated on the edge of Cassidy’s bed.

When her father crossed the threshold of her bedroom, it took her a few seconds to process that he was 400 miles from where she expected him to be. At first she thought her mother was ill or dead or that something was terribly wrong somehow; but John was there without his wife because Marie wasn’t capable of thinking of Cassidy as the type of girl to end up in that type of place—she was raised better than that.
Her roommates followed behind, mostly drunk, but still ready to say their piece about the robbery and give her an ultimatum about the dealing.

“What’s going on?” she asked, looking on every surface for her cigarettes after failing to find them in her pockets.

“You know what this is,” John replied.

Outside her bedroom, the party continued on with no sign of stopping any time soon. Cassidy’s own 21st birthday was only a few weeks away.

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She detoxed at home and had the chills for days and shuddered and sweated while her body fought to remember how to be well without coping against poison. She smoked pot with her father, but she craved a higher plane—that other galaxy.

John was offbeat from the malnourished arrhythmia of his daughter’s generation—the new, dispossessed, voiceless masses of the anti-American iconoclast pothead—smoking cigarettes in a city at night, lit and jerked about like bells against the endless humming of a world gone to a restless sleep without them. Cassidy sat, wondering who might be telling her stories, grinding her teeth out of habit—with nothing to chatter on about, nothing even to tell herself.

Alone, or thinking she was alone, she tore through medicine cabinets looking for something to save her. Stories of army friends drinking Robitussin, mouthwash, and even vanilla extract when they were in basic training and shocked to face a reality of no noontime beer or whiskeysour at night surfaced from her memory. She examined all her bills for caked
on powders she may have been careless with and, coming up empty, settled for taking three Tylenol PM’s that no one had thought to hide.

John saw her desperation; it reaffirmed his decision to send her to the Villa. Insurance wouldn’t cover her stay, so John took what remained from the pile of Cassidy’s drug money and invested it in her rehabilitation. But it wasn’t typical for clients to pay for two-week stays with cold, hard cash. Cassidy and her father waited while the frontdesk clerk went to fetch someone with more authority to oversee the transaction. A plaque of the Desiderata told the entire room to strive to be happy.

John surveyed the lobby while Cassidy signed the papers—it was all different now, it would all be different for her. There are those who are cognizant of their addiction and those who aren’t—those who self-identify, and those who are still in denial. All he could hope to do was wake her up and let her live her life, mistakes land as they may. So he left.

They took any personal possessions deemed distractions and her Luden’s cherry cough drops, and locked them in a cubby. Tears formed as Cassidy handed over her books, and she started to panic.

“You need to concentrate on you now,” she was told.

Next, the counselor unfolded her clothes and searched through her bag for any contraband. The counselor’s name was Anne, and she smiled through her task and attempted to design small talk that would comfort the quivering Cassidy, but failed.

The first meeting in the facility was a haze. There was a flickering light; they sat in chairs of different heights and introduced themselves. Cassidy quietly sobbed rhythmically.
was all too real: ripped from school and work and her life as a drug dealing lush with an endless craving for something unexplainable.

The woman directly opposite her had terrible scabs on her face, as though in a recent fire. She recapped to the group for Cassidy’s benefit that she didn’t remember how her face came to be so disfigured because she was drunk at the time. The hardest times to recall in life are the ones surrounding the events that brought you down in flames; your attention was elsewhere.

Recaps of seemingly pivotal moments and highlights of personal glories built camaraderie. Some women were older, many were in their 20’s. All had been there for days or weeks or months and were adjusted to crying newcomers like Cassidy. They let her stay quiet when it was her turn to talk and tried to introduce themselves and their stories in ways that comforted and welcomed her.

In these inpatient circles of forced fellowships—Cassidy found herself staring at the yellowed eyes of resignation—the disease of atrophied possibility. They’d all listen to each other, float off in their minds to relive their own epic tragedies, absorbing the ghosts in the air. Their stories ultimately overlapped and came to the same conclusions.

“Mostly, I find myself returning to the worst mornings... when I woke up beside him, bandaged... I knew *something* had happened, but I didn’t know what.” Sympathetic nods flitted the room as a short woman with a raspy voice told a story of cutting her wrists in a blackout.

“Hi, my name is Jolene, and I’m an alcoholic and an addict.”
“Hi Jolene.” Half the group grimaced at the word “addict” pinned so closely to the name of their own disease. There were obvious divisions among the women who identified themselves only as ‘alcoholics’ and those who declared themselves ‘addicts’. Mostly, the young women had the illicit drug problems and the older, booze-craving women judged them as they recapped their illicit activities shamelessly.

“So, I was living with my boyfriend, my parents had thrown me out. And at first it was such a good setup—he’d always get all our shit; he had the hookup, ya know? I never worried about anything. But one day he came home all bloody and angry and told me I had to help him figure something out because he got robbed. So I went back to my parents’, and stayed just long enough to steal their credit cards. I got my hands on 5,000 dollars before they realized. We held up in a Motel 6 for a while and didn’t do much but sit around on drugs or waiting to do more drugs. They were looking for us, but we didn’t care. Of course my parents pressed charges. I don’t blame them. It all went in our veins—5 grand. They sent him to jail. I got lucky and wound up here because I’m only sixteen. I hope he’s out soon. We can be clean together after all this, I know we can. I mean, shit—all that money...”

“Hi, I’m Lizzie, and I’m an alcoholic,” a middle-aged woman in an oversized blue sweater introduced herself to the usual choral response.

“My father used to send me and my little sister to the corner store for his whiskey. He used to go himself, before he got too sick. He had hepatitis—and that can get ugly. He drank every day. And every night he sent us for a liter of the cheapest whiskey they had at that store. We’d walk in and any new customers would look at us with squinted eyes—see us as out of place. But the man behind the counter would have dad’s order waiting for us, and when no one was eyeing him too suspiciously, he’d take our dad’s money and hand us his
whiskey. *His best customers,* he’d call us. But when dad got really sick, I decided he didn’t need his whiskey. He’d forget which pills he took and light the burners to spark up his cigarettes, then just leave them, or fall asleep with lit ones in his mouth. He burned through all of his good shirts. My sister and I decided we’d had enough, so we didn’t go to the store for him that night. He got angry, but was too weak to chase us. We ran from the house and spent the night at a friend’s, then straight to school, then another night away. He had dried out before. We thought we knew what was best for him—wanted to dry him out. Or, well, *I* thought I knew, so I convinced my little sister to go along with it; it was all my fault. When we got home that day, he was dead on the couch. I didn’t realize coming off of booze could kill someone. I just didn’t know. The next week, I started going back to the corner store to get that whiskey. At first, it was in honor of my dad. But then, it just helped so much... it helped me get right in my head... sometimes when I’m back out there and off the wagon, I’m more afraid of dying when I stop than I am of dying with a liver full of liquor.”

They went on—always more to go on about, always regrets to air.

"I guess, thinking about it, the first drug I ever took was for Lyme Disease—I was just a little kid and I had a weird, rare, amphetamine-like reaction to the medication... it went on for weeks. I’d run up and down staircases and started getting into trouble—I had so much energy, I just remember being really, really happy about it. But I could have just been manic. Who knows? Either way, I had this weird reaction, and ya know—it was the first time I made the connection that a pill could make me feel differently—better... fixed, even. I loved it; drugs suddenly became important—they became everything. It’s what made me want to work in medicine—I was looking forward to gaining access to drugs before I was even a teenager.”

A nurse in her 30’s in for painkiller abuse and drug theft from her hospital’s lockup had the
floor. She worked night shifts and was adjusted to a complete opposite schedule than the Villa offered; she never felt well and blamed it on her screwed up circadian rhythms, even though she was 45 days into her treatment.

They continued in a blur of admissions and lamentations.

“My mama, she was a hell of a woman. She never left the house without eyeliner and always smiled. She took everything that came to her, even when her boyfriends beat her. She drank a lot to get through. So... I spent years drinking to get by in the same way. And mama, she died a few years back. All the women in my family always had such deep troubles and no mind for fixin’ them the right way.”

Cassidy was scared to consider all the things she had forgotten, while replaying the things she was bound to never forget. Inside they ruminated and bonded and some even detached from their old mentalities, while others outside bumbled about with their superficial concerns and aboveboard lives, unaffected by the same hazardous materials.

Tammy spoke. She used to model jeans for JCPenny 40 pounds before her coke use turned to crack use, then destitution. Her husband was in jail; she always made sure to mention her husband, because her ring was long-ago pawned, and her stories of him were the only evidence he really existed.

“There were cop car lights all around when I snapped back into myself—it was like waking into a bad dream—a nightmare. The police already had him on the ground and I was screaming without meaning to—no power to stop. We were both so gone.”

Some stories were harder to hear than others; some were harder to tell.
"I know you have to ‘learn to hang up on your disease’ and all that, but I had a really mean dad. So when I met my husband and he was sweet to me, I fell hard. I mean, I jumped into this thing to save myself, not knowing how sad he would make me, and how he would be the end of me—ya know what I’m saying?” Barb had a thick Long Island accent and wore more rings than any of the other women; she would sit, spin them around her fingers and comment on how little water she was retaining. Her drug of choice was wine, and the addicts all exchanged glances of disbelief that she was trying to find a story for the spotlight again.

“I had ten years sober. But then, well...I fucked up. But since they raided my house and took my kids, all I want to do is crawl up and die.” Maggie had all the enthusiasm of a young drug addict, and the ailing body of an old one—one who was already doomed. The ones with only weeks and months sober felt the falls of those senior to them in sobriety the hardest. There was no ‘forever well,’ so many pushed off the wagon by deaths of loved ones and the desperation that accompanies grief.

A large woman with a crooked, red wig and drawn on eyebrows was up next. “As far as sustaining myself on alcohol and misery, I should have gotten a prize. In a way, I did... I lived a bad life, ya know? I just... I lived a bad life for a long time. And I deserve this. The courts sent me here... I kept getting toasted at the bar and taking the long way home because they’d wait for me on the short way, ya know. Yeah, well... they caught me. My lawyer got me this place instead of jail, seeing as how I only have so much time left...”

There was always more misery to recall.
“We left my sister around the side of the building—we didn’t want to fix in front of her, ya know? We told her to stay on the bench, but, Christ—she didn’t. Of course she didn’t, she was just a little kid... just, left alone someplace strange. She went looking for us—calling for us. I heard her calling, but just needed one more minute. I heard her calling—until I didn’t anymore. The car knocked her clean out of her shoes—I saw them first, and she was... she was just so far away from them. She was 5. They were those stupid sneakers that light up when you walk, ya know? After that, my using got really bad.” She was sobbing now. “You’d think it’d be the opposite, right—I’d quit my shit and not put my parents through anything else? But here I am, the disappointment that I am. The only daughter left. The murderer.”

No, honey, they reassured her: We all kill something. We’re so sorry for your disease. We’re so sorry for your loss. They all soothed each other.

“The first few times I drank, I drank too much—it was like I was programmed to. But I always black out when I drink. Every time. So much has happened that I’ll just never have any memory of. That’s why I like the pills—no messy situations come out of a Hydrocodone. I just sleep.” A petite brunette with a pill addiction and long hair adjusted herself in her chair.

“You do something to yourself; you give away a state of mind that you can’t get back, you know—the time before you knew that the drug was all you ever needed. But then all you want to do is keep the party going.” Everyone had memorized a little piece of something; everyone had something to say—jewels of wisdom to impart.

“We don’t get to choose what we’re like—it’s predetermined and out of our hands. Our only power is over how we handle ourselves as we are; we’re smart girls, we just need to want
to be okay—get a picture in our minds and then the rest will fall in place.” For some, it was as simple as inadequate serotonin production.

“If you’re smart, you change when you have to. It’ll stick when you’re ready.” Others nodded in agreement with the only black woman among 30 white faces.

“Nah-uh... it’s already decided. I’m nuts. And I can blame it on the ketchup chips. MSG, it fucks with your brain. Makes you a drug addict.” Tammy interjected.

“What? That’s not something that happens,” the redhead contested.

“Yeah it is. I read an article on Yahoo.”

The redhead shrugged and submitted with an, “Oh, you kids.”

The same chorus continued, chirping somewhat brighter.

“When you sober up, you miss the private moments you used to spend talking yourself into doing things. I mean... how many conversations in mirrors have we had?” No one spoke, but most women smiled.

“Maybe it’s just me... but I had a lot of fun trying to trick myself. I’ve gotten a lot smarter over the years, I’ll tell you that...” When the rent’s paid, and times aren’t so hard—it’s hard to stop slow self-destruction with acute benefits of elation.

“Ha, not me. It got to the point where I didn’t know why I did the things I did; I couldn’t understand my own actions—piecing together a fractured night and attempting to figure out my motivations was like attempting psychoanalysis on a roommate I never saw, only found evidence of—I had no idea what she was thinking.”
“They’ll never understand the dangers of eating port wine-flavored cheese, or why I’m skittish around vodka sauce.” There were those who had been in the Villa so long that they didn’t know how to live outside—this was their safe place. They had heard the vodka sauce debate a handful of times before.

“You really don’t use vodka sauce now?”

“Or alcohol with mouthwash,” one woman confirmed.

“What? That’s crazy. Don’t you trust yourself?”

“I do. But it’s the disease—I don’t trust the disease.”

“But it’s your hand the bottle’s in.”

“If it’s already in my hand, it’s not my hand anymore.”

“It’s frickin’ mouthwash.” The group laughed.

And not all of the women were in the Villa voluntarily—some opted to go there as part of a plea in family court, all the victims of their own deviant brain waves.

“Yeah, well... everybody’s engaged in some destructive behavior—mine just happens to be illegal. So here I am. I wasn’t out of control.”

They shifted in their chairs in preparation for the next speaker—constantly shifting in their chairs.

“Then when I woke up that morning, I just felt so broken. No memory, I guess maybe it settles me to know it never existed.”
When traumas happen in a blackout, there’s a quick recovery from it because you’ve already sheltered yourself from getting too close to whatever trainwreck you found yourself at the center of—people who flip cars or fall off bikes or are thrown from horses are often apprehensive about getting back on, but when it never really happened in your mind, you have no hesitation about remounting. For those with the most dangerous of tendencies, blackouts are finally at their worst when you have to answer to the legal system for the things you did when you weren’t still in your own mind.

“I’m just so jealous of you young people; you all have a real shot,” an older alcoholic Some would find another corner of the room to focus on—already planning their falls.

The chimera of addiction charged at them every hour from every direction. They shared more plot-twists than they knew they remembered—saving the lows and tragedies and realizations for group meetings: the designated revelatory times. The highs—the best of times—were shared privately in the cigarette smokers’ pen.

When there was free time, the younger girls—the ones who were the addicts, mostly—would sit around comparing notes on drugs. They thought they had become experts on their own drug of choice: where to strike good veins, for how long to cook, which pill for what, and the height of the milligrams necessary. Usually, they were correct in their assignments and self-prescriptions, but doctors would be appalled at what addicts profess to know—strung out, toying with dopamine levels, killing off cells, flicking at serotonin receptors, thirsty for oxytocin and pep—leaning on bag-filled shopping carts by fire hydrants dishing out advice on the exact right MG cut off.
“It’s all for that feeling—the one that’s as good as the first. The best is when you nail it—when you’ve finally won the game of combinations that addicts play and you think you’re in the right frame of mind to do whatever it is that you need to do—it’s this sort of nirvana.”

What used to be a spectacular setting—just enough, just right—didn’t cut it anymore. The point recedes into tragic catalysts until months of crazy turn to relapses, numbered after being so inclined to instinctually pervert our most basic needs...

“The worst is when you’re in the middle of some condition—coming down, or trying to come up...and you’re powerless because there isn’t enough. You realize you’d do just about anything for more.” You’ve spun the wheel of the great rotating array of planes... it’s all an interchangeable escalatory freefall until you run out and set yourself up and cycle through again. The drug power dynamic never holds, even when you think you’ve achieved what they all swore was impossible, you eventually have no choice but to relinquish your power to the constant call of an addiction—the effects grow subtle, your body demands more—you abide unwaveringly, no matter the cost.

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Cassidy didn’t want to get out of bed; but at the same time, she desperately and instantly wanted to eject herself from the strange situation she kept waking into—this wasn’t her bed: the angle was wrong, the slants of light all strange. She did her best to keep from participating in mealtimes, cutting her food intake down to a single, dry English muffin daily, and coffee—lots of coffee.

Her roommate Toni had short blonde hair and spoke without a filter. A few sentences into knowing her, she’d announce herself as the daughter of a former heroin addict who was
now a successful businesswoman. She was a mother there on scholarship through a program that offered to return custody of her daughter to her upon completion of her stay at the Villa. Kids from dysfunction grow up and they go off and live their lives as functionally as they can—obsessed with it, and doomed.

Over cigarettes—the only comfort from their old lives besides clothes and shoes—Toni insisted, “It’s 100%. You’re gonna screw your kids up; they’re gonna be like you. Just look at my mom.”

It was Toni’s third time at the Villa. She was satisfying a family court order from her boyfriend’s parents, who were currently in custody of her three-year-old daughter. She stripped in Poughkeepsie for cash, and sometimes stayed in the city. The sadness in her pride over her mother’s success belied the fact that she hadn’t spoken to her mother in four years.

Every time Toni got in trouble, she made a straightforward plea for the Villa to help save her again. She’d sit awake early in the communal meal area, drinking coffee and blinking her eyes to wet them so she could see through the disposable contacts she bragged she’d been wearing for 2 years straight. She expressed her failures and her hopes expertly at the meetings; Toni knew how to work a recovery room.

Cassidy had seraphic daydreams—conversations with Pleiades; she recognized that she was one of them—able to add to a pool of similar mistakes.

They were sitting outside, sharing cigarettes and counselor horror stories.

“Well, why does he get to call himself recovered?”

“He has enough years to do it. Like thirty or something.”
“He’s a pig. I can tell by the way he looks at us.”

“Yeah. But there are a few good counselors. Like Anne.”

“Hey, did you hear that tomorrow’s her last day?”

“No. Shit. Really?”

“Yeah, she’s leaving to be a marine biologist.”

“Didn’t she leave a job blowing glass a few years ago to work here?”

“Ha, well, she’s young. You kids these days—you always want to do so much.”

“We have to. We never wanted to.”

“I’m gonna miss her.”

“You know who I miss? Richard.”

“Haha, oh yeah—Toni, is it true that the last time you were in here you got a counselor fired?”

“Ha, he was barely a counselor. I was more qualified to counsel than he was. Besides, he was a pot head, anyway. I could tell.”

***

After the first week, Cassidy grew accustomed to the habits of the other women; on family visiting day her father came alone and mentioned a joint in his pocket when they went
for a walk around the grounds. Outside, Cassidy noticed his motorcycle parked boldly—kickstand digging into the edge of a flowerbed.

Visiting day marked a boiling point for most of the girls. Toni never had a guest, and grew restless with playing the part of the *almighty recovering*; and, as experienced rehab patients do, she developed a plan to sneak drugs onto the grounds—every patient’s secret fantasy. She found an empty room that was left unlocked—no culpability if things went south; she’d done it before—it was one of her proudest accomplishments. Cassidy didn’t care to ask what Toni planned to have delivered, and handed her $20 gladly.

That night, the roommates waited till the staff was done checking the rooms and counting the addicts; then, they shifted quickly and quietly from their assigned room, to the empty one facing the long driveway encompassing the northside of the Villa. Armed with crocheting yarn attached to a styrofoam cup, the girls pried the screen away from the window just long enough to drop it out and lower it two floors down. Toni’s friends from the city promised they’d make the drop by midnight.

But, from the window, Cassidy saw light expand into the courtyard as two of the counselors stepped out an emergency exit and into the dark. The girls stood in silence, hoping the counselors would fail to notice the dangling cup; they saw the flicker of a lighter, then another. The staffers were outside passing a bowl between them.

No drugs were delivered that night; the plan was ruined. But the next day Cassidy caught Toni headed into the bathroom with a baggie and a secret. Toni’s friends had hidden the heroin delivery under a rock when they saw the counselors outside. At first, she hadn’t planned to say anything to Cassidy about finding it.
“You’re going to love it,” Toni promised, sorting out Cassidy’s line on their bathroom sink. “There’s nothing as good as your first time.” The heroin struck quickly and brought on a queasy feeling, followed by a calm that immobilized her entirely. She splayed out on her borrowed mattress and watched as Toni finished the bag.

An hour later at their mandatory AA meeting, the girls sat together in an attempt to avoid interacting too much with the others and risk revealing their drugged states.

Toni was released 2 days later when her mandated time was up. When people detach from facilities, makeshift parties or powwows are held to wish them luck. They had a group meeting in Toni’s honor, and all of the women told stories of how her understanding of their disease had helped them. They wished her luck in her sobriety. In the end, Toni left Cassidy a pair of tan boots that were one size too big, and a whole lot of trouble.

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There were rumors that the daughter of someone important was set to arrive at the Villa. It was 6 days before Cassidy’s 21st birthday, and she had been in the Villa for 10 of her very expensive 14 days. The women speculated over the new arrival in the chickencoop they called a smoking porch, but Cassidy couldn’t have guessed it would be her cousin.

Kayla McArthur was accustomed to getting what she wanted. She was a few years younger than Cassidy, and they hadn’t seen each other much in the years since the McArthurs moved to Boston. When Cassidy was 14 and Kayla was twelve, they threw a pool party in the McArthur’s large New Jersey home when her parents were away. Kayla was confident that the vodka they used for screwdrivers would never be missed from her parents’ well-stocked bar, and it wasn’t.
But Kayla didn’t stay on alcohol long; she was there detoxing from heroin. A recent arrest that her father couldn’t block meant that Kayla had to prove to a judge that she wanted to reform. John’s brother recommended that Gerry McArthur send his daughter to the Villa—after all, it saved his life. He very rarely relapsed. It had been years since the last episode, on which he had taken his young son. No one in the family knew Cassidy was already serving time at the Villa.

After a day in detox, Kayla and Cassidy saw each other for the first time. Kayla was glad to cling to Cassidy and tell her stories about a boyfriend and a boatload of money they’d spent on drugs. Kayla was restless in the facility; the fix still called to her. She needed to find a way.

“My roommate snuck something in for us. It was pretty easy. The counselors here are morons.” Cassidy bragged without any forethought to the consequences of her admission. She was trying to somehow impress her socialite cousin by telling her she had tried heroin for the first time in rehab.

“Well, reach out to her again.” Kayla’s eyes wide, she hungrily demanded that Cassidy set up another dropoff. Cassidy tried to explain it wasn’t her connection, but Kayla saw a way to get well again, and couldn’t let it go. The girls were interrupted and reminded to head to their noon group meeting; it was Kayla’s first, but she wasn’t ready to cry yet.

The next day, Cassidy was following her yoga instructor’s movements along with twenty other women when two guards and three counselors entered the room. “Please come with us.”
In the office sat four people she had never seen before. A large man with glasses who seemed to be in charge spoke up.

“It’s been determined that money was exchanged for drugs, and that there was a plan to bring drugs onto the grounds. Do you deny this?” Cosack questioned.

She chose to deny nothing.

“Young lady, you know, there are over 23 million addicts and alcoholics in this country currently in need of a place with a program like this. Well, the fact of the matter is that only 2 million or so get to go to a facility like this. How are you at math?”

“Not great, I’m an English major.” She was tearing up in anticipation of some punishment.

“Well, do you know what that makes you? One of the 1%. You had a real shot, and you just refused to take it. It’s just so disappointing, young lady. I knew your father; I knew your uncle—they both eventually saddled up and got on board with our program here.”

He continued, “You collected money. You planned to bring drugs in. You are a danger to the other women here. We will be escorting you off the grounds and back to your parents’ house.”

Cassidy was stunned by the accusations. They knew everything, and somehow she was taking the blame for the entire plan. Through the hallway outside, Cassidy saw Kayla pass by and peer in quickly.

Had Cassidy denied that she provided the drug connection, it could have hurt Toni’s chances of getting her life back—her daughter. So, Cassidy took the blame as it was placed on
her, knowing she was left at an advantage: even if she hadn’t yet lost her family or her face, she stood, just as these women had, to lose everything.

As she was driven home in the Villa’s van, she cried softly and unsurely. At her parents’ home in Dutchess, Mr. Cosack had left a phone message explaining exactly why Cassidy was thrown out. John was already outside changing the oil on his wife’s car when they drove up.

“They told me I was a danger to the other people there. So they drove me home.”

“What? How were you a danger?”

“Did you know Kayla was going to be there?” she asked.


“Yes.”

“I heard she was having trouble, but I certainly didn’t recommend that they send her there. Especially not now.”

“She fucking sold me out for heroin… or, I guess, for the lack of heroin. I’m not sure why she would do that.”

“Wait, you got thrown out for heroin?”

“I didn’t know what my roommate was sneaking in. I would have gone along with anything. I figured it was coke, and I didn’t want to be there.”

“No, you didn’t. And I suppose you had to want to be there. I just hoped you would want to be there after a few days of listening.”
“It made a difference—it did. I listened.”

John just shook his head.

“Hey, you said you’d give me everything back once I was done. I’m out. It’s almost my birthday. Come on.” Cassidy stepped closer, knowing it really wasn’t worth trying to intimidate her father, but putting what little energy she had into it, nonetheless. “Dude, where are my drugs?”

“I’m not giving you your pills back. I flushed them.” John was unrepentant.

“All of them?!?” Her personal stash, gone, because he was driven by his distrust of big pharma and all things prescribable. “Fine. Then where’s my weed? You smoke, you can’t expect me not to smoke.”

“No, I want you to smoke. I want you to quit it with the bottles and the pills and even the cigarettes, and I want you to smoke pot instead. It’s the Marijuana Maintenance program—you maintain with weed. I don’t expect you to quit smoking pot. I want you to smoke more.” John had a plan.

“But pot’s a drug and drugs are bad, right? That’s why you wanted to throw me into that place,” Cassidy countered.

“You know how I feel about pot; I don’t think you should smoke pot all the time. You’ve had an opportunity to clear your head—work on demons. But when you have the urge to drink, smoke a joint. Or toke on a bowl instead of a cigarette.”

“Well, okay. But I was all set to call you a hypocrite. I’ve sure been thinking it for almost two weeks.” She realized she still had nothing to smoke, and that upset her.
A funeral procession began to roll by; this was a common occurrence—they lived close to a graveyard. The neighborhood was buoyed by cars for sale—signs in their windows, all parked on front lawns. Look hard and you’d spot overfilled septic tanks in the snow—the stink of poor finance, gargantuan barrels of contaminated water seeping outward, homes with squirrels in the ceiling making their nests in the space between the attic and the bedrooms, mice in the floorboards, roaches cutting across floors. Their home was a few plots down from a cemetery. Their real estate agent promised it was almost completely full back in ’83 and swore that all the people being laid to rest there had owned their plots for years and years and were joining spouses or family already in the ground. It was now a rare occurrence to find themselves blocked in their driveway by slow-moving processions.

Few people visit autumn graveyards—sad, sparse arrangements of flowers decorated the lawn. At least in spring, if you’ve been forgotten, nature remembers and finds some way to adorn your grave—bee pollen, bat piss, or overgrown grass & daisies remind us of the dead in delicate seasons.

Cassidy didn’t get distracted from the matter at hand.

“Alright, so... give me my pot back, then,” she requested, frustrated.

“Well, the thing about that is—you might want to consider how much this cost us—gas and everything, taking time off work,” he said, eyebrows raised.

Cassidy thrust her head to the side. “Great. So, you’re saying you smoked all my weed? Come on, I had like an ounce, man. It’s been 11 days,” she said, upset at having none of the drugs she kept in the back of her mind during her stay at the Villa.
“No, no. Calm down. I’m not saying I smoked all your weed. I’m saying your mother and I both smoked, well, most of it. We can replace it with ours- more than an ounce, or we can give you money.”

“Dad, you smoke weed like it’s still 40 dollars an ounce. You owe me $400.” He smoked it remorselessly, so she quoted him NYC streetvalue for the time.

“Yeah, and you owe me your life,” he told the same old joke, though it had taken on new meaning. “And you know I do remember when it went from $40 to forty-five. I was angry.”

“Yep. I know, dad.” She sat down to pack a bowl from the near-eighth her father had just handed back to her. She hit it twice, then passed it to him without diverting her attention from her computer screen. He took the handoff flawlessly; he was always aware of when a bowl might be passed to him—alert and aware at the sound of a lighter flick.

He exhaled through his nose—a habit Cassidy was glad she never picked up. She watched him hold his mouth closed, trying to let the THC absorb as absolutely as it could—sacred blood-brain barrier, crossed.

“And I don’t owe you $400; no one should owe anyone $400 for an ounce of weed. For christssake, it’s a plant. We can grow more.”

“Ha. That’s easy for you to say.”

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In her time after the Villa, she attempted to convince herself that she got to be one of those people—’the normal ones’—that she could still have the things that the other women
would have to miss out on. She seemed to be stronger—more in control—cognizant of cycles and ready to break all those small & large immutable habits that made her doubt her own sanity.

Three days still paid for, over the phone, an office assistant told John that because his daughter broke the rules, they forfeited the money. At the Villa the next day, John demanded a meeting with Cosack.

“My daughter was here for alcohol, not heroin. Your facility exposed her to heroin. You owe me a refund. My daughter wasn’t a danger—you endangered her.”

“It’s a hellluva thing to see you again, Mr. Millbrook,” Cosack mused before he reluctantly listened to John explain all of the reasons why the Villa owed Cassidy back her drug money.
The breeze had a chill that struck at his face and reddened his nose as they had him on the side of the road, against his car in the dark. Then came the next step, and John was placed in the back of the trooper vehicle.

Tired from 3 accumulated hours of driving up from the Bronx through traffic after visiting his mother, entering the last stretch of highway before he'd make it home, his car hugged the curve too closely and he flirted enough with the white line to get the attention of two waiting troopers.

The car was on him in an instant. John was guilty of sparking a joint just a few miles before, so he quickly ate the remaining evidence when he saw the lights flashing behind him. When the trooper got to his window, the smell was painfully obvious, but the evidence was gone. John, nonetheless, was caught red-eyed and red-handed and with a terrible case of cotton mouth from the impulsive joint disposal.

The first officer didn't take much time to talk to John beyond the customary, "Where are you headed tonight? Where are you coming from?" before ordering him out of the car and calling his partner over to assist in patting him down along the roadside. The second officer pulled a pipe John had owned for 30 years out of a sweatshirt in the backseat.

"Wow, hey Rick—you know what this is?"

"A paraphernalia charge?"
"Ha, yeah. But it's also a meerschaum pipe—a nice one." He smiled at the other officer, as if to say and it's ours now. It was foolish to maintain any type of sentimentality toward paraphernalia.

He thought of his job; at his current job, he was only subjected to a drug test when he was first hired. He could smoke in his free time and went about his life as he pleased, bringing him to this very moment in the car. The pipe wasn't well hidden. He was high and had no cologne to mask it. He had obeyed the speed limit, smoked every so often, and hadn't seen many cops on the drive—lulling him into a false sense of security. Over the years, he had forgotten to think like a criminal, so he found himself entirely unprepared to be one. He was under arrest.

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John’s mother was an orphan raised by Aunts, and his father’s mother hanged herself in a barn when John’s father was a teen. John was named for his father. John’s father drank at every good opportunity to imbibe, and at work sat calmly at his desk rejecting promotion after promotion for thirty years.

“I like my route. I like my men. I’m happy right here,” John Sr. would say. His family didn’t have much, but it was enough, and it was all they needed. By his fifth year as management at the power company, he knew all the landlords in the local buildings, so instead of having to go out and deal with his share of fierce, unrepentant resistance from the residents choosing to tango that week on his Problem Shut-Off list, he’d call the landlords and ask them to turn off the tenants’ power for him, then he’d hit the closest tavern with an Irish flag over its entryway. Sometimes it was all a simple master switch, no trouble for the landlord—other
times John’s father wound up owing favors in the form of daytime trips with liquor bottle gifts in hand—a work expense, he’d joke as he’d cement his opportunity to outsource his job and take a nap by 2 or so.

Once a week, John Sr. would take their family dog out for a walk and leave him tied up outside some local tavern. John sometimes reflected on the long blocks of his childhood spent searching the sidewalks on cold nights trying to determine where his father left their dog; on those memories and a thousand more, he founded an utter disgust for alcoholics and their nectar. At his father’s funeral years later, strangers came up to John and told him how his father “wrote such beautiful poetry.” His uncle confirmed this vigorously at the wake through a Kerry brogue thickened by dark liquor.

“He had talent. He was smart, but never very ambitious.” His uncle paused for a second in a moment of grief. “But, you know, John, you could have been so much more—had so much more. Jesus, you’re so smart. Maybe the smartest of all of us—lord knows you don’t have the same devil as the rest of us have on our shoulders. Aw, your father—he loved the drink something awful. But, who am I tellin’, eh?” His uncle slapped his back with a weak hand, already begun to tremble with the Parkinson’s, but still blamable on booze. John grew to hate the rosy cheeks of the drunken slob—even if the slob was family.

“You know, your father should’ve taken me up on my offer.”

“What do you mean? What offer?”

“Oh, John—such wasted potential. You know—I offered. Twasn’t my fault that your old man, oh Jesus rest his soul, your pa was a proud one. He hated anything that felt the least bit
like charity—wished nothing more than what he’d earned. Yeah, all he really needed was a fun-lovin’, lively group and a gaggle of glasses. Always the fun one, your father.”

“What did you offer?” John asked, entirely unaware of what his uncle was referring to.

“Well, I was going to pay for you to go to school—any school you wanted. Not just that... which one were you going to go to back then?”

“NYU,” John answered darkly, his uncle having tripped a memory of 1 week of classrooms and spending time with books and lectures rather than out in the real world. John had only registered at NYU because it was free in those days, and because the last week before his graduation from Bronx Science, a short, stalky man sent for him in the middle of a Biology lecture.

“Did you know that you’re the only graduating senior not moving on to higher education?” the man had asked.

“No, I did not. I’m sorry, Mr...?”

“That’s funny, young man. Mr. Feltcher—your guidance counselor. We’ve probably met before.” They had not.

“What do you expect to make of yourself, son?” the middle-aged man asked from under his chalk-colored hair.

“I’m making plenty of myself right now.” With his third paycheck at age 14, he was able to purchase his family their first color television. He worked a full-time job from 16-18 with the power company, and by 18, had an impressive savings account earmarked for weed and car needs and weekly date nights with his fiancé, Marie. After two years at the power
company, he saw a future: stability, promotions, vacations, and paychecks. He chose all that over any other path he might’ve been expected to take after graduation.

John found himself situated again in the present nightmare of his father’s funeral when his uncle coughed a little, leaning forward at the excitement of telling secrets over the dead.

“Your father turned me down—said you would get where you were going on your own.”

John had intended to go to college—but the temptation to stay and flourish in a workforce he was already so far embedded in was something he couldn’t pass up. He received a minor promotion about a week into the only semester he ever registered for; it was more money, but it demanded more of his time. He quit college, and could gush to his parents at their occasional dinners together about how he was one of the youngest managers the company had decided to trust in a long time.

So, John had gotten to where he was going. His mind weak with the hypnogasia of a chronic smoker, he reflected on what would come next from the small, windowless cell.

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He lit a joint and took a long, deliberate pull, savoring the tannins of cannabis delight, leaving a fresh, stiff mass of grey ash as he passed it to Cassidy.

College wrapped itself up the month before, and she joined so many others of her generation who were once again living with their parents and working a string of mindless jobs for crumbs—the majority powered by adderall & energy shots, binge drinking, excessive serotonin, and broken dopamine receptors. In those days, Cassidy clung to the truths she
needed; that time marked her great retreat from reality—so much time spent shifting around the objects in her childhood bedroom and wondering about karma, enduring the tinnitus of the agony of sobriety. Torn open and in dysphoria—her addict brain struggling to prevail, she’d sit for long spans with the news on her screen and not a thought on her mind. She woke from disturbed dreams of swigging from broken shotglasses and remembered with anxious disappointment that she could not pour herself a morning drink to forget her nightmares. It was hard to go places sober. It hurt to be sober, and her butane lungs ached. But most highly functional alcoholics are always one bad decision away from ruining their lives—they willingly submit themselves to an endless cycle of unfortunate circumstances.

“Mom still refuses to go?” Cassidy had agreed to drive her father to any and all of his court-related business.

“Yeah. Your mother has very strong feelings about all this.” His arrest had made the local papers.

“That’s unfair. You got screwed—plain and simple. You know, when I was delivering pizzas a few months ago, I got pulled over and the officer saw a pipe I had stupidly forgotten was in a compartment that had faulty hinges and was always swinging open—it was a chillum with eggs for eyes and a bacon smile. It was a normal traffic stop; technically I had blown through a yellow just as it was changing. I was a block from my restaurant. When I heard, “Give me the pipe,” at first I was stunned—I had no idea what he was talking about. Then he shone his flashlight in the car and I could see the chillum reflecting back at us. I said “Officer, I wasn’t smoking”—and I was being as sincere as I could. He answers, “I know you weren’t,” takes it, and walks back to his car. I sat there in the middle of four of the most nervous minutes of my life—wondering if another squadcar was about to come and pull up alongside
us, or if the dogs were on their way. But I would be lying if I said I wasn’t cursing the loss of the bowl at the same time. In another scenario, he took it—that was the most realistic scenario. Instead, he came back to the car, handed it back to me, and said it hasn’t been smoked out of. We both knew that was a lie. But I took it back through the window and put it in my purse. He handed me a ticket for running a red light. I went to court for it and got it knocked down to parking on pavement.”

John sighed for himself, but smiled at his daughter’s fortunate harmless brush with the law. “Crack dealers, meth cookers, heroin smugglers—that is where the attention should be.”

“Yep,” Cassidy agreed. “I’m sorry about your pipe, dad.”

“Yeah, I bet it didn’t make it into any kind of police evidence lockup or anything. It’s gone.”

“Motherfucking cops.”

“Yeah, but if pipes were the only victims of this war, it’d be a far better place.”

“You’re just going to show up high?” Marie said immediately as she entered the room.

“Yes,” he exhaled and passed the joint to Cassidy.

“You too?” She glared at Cassidy.

“Yeah. Why not?”

“Because it’s a goddamn court house. At least wear a body spray or cologne.” Marie was visibly frustrated with John, in spite of her refusal to participate in his day in court.

“We will. I have one in my purse,” Cassidy promised.
John’s lawyer advised him to plead the drug violation down to Driving While Ability Impaired-Alcohol because it would have a lesser impact on his record and future employment opportunities; he did as necessary, and was once again officially deemed an alcohol abuser.
Once crowding alleyways, now the open-air drug market was everywhere—if you didn't see it, then you didn't want to see it. There were the obvious dirty street corners, marked benches, sketchy storage units or front bodegas, and semi-reliable pager dealers. Anyone could be a dealer: it was the old man with a cane and a backpack on his lap reading by the river, or it was the teenage girl texting in a McDonalds, or the grandma with the cookie tin wanted $10 a pop from her spot in the park. The businessman barking into a phone in a Starbucks line had eight ounces of hash lining his suitjacket. Elderly couples sold dime bags from their kitchen windows after setting up makeshift drive-throughs. No city or town was ever dry; someone still always nosed out the need and filled the vacuum following the fall of a major dealer or the failure of a major deal.

In the suburbs, drugs arrived in rusty sedans in driveways, or the buyer picked up. A friend of a friend always knew someone—this gave a sense of security and hope that the dealer would deal straight; but they all had their tricks. Some simply shorted people by a gram here or half a gram there. Others wet down their bud with water or soda spray to make it heavier. Sometimes weed was dried out in microwaves, killing the potency but taking minutes instead of days or weeks. Some dealers sprayed their product with RAID or other poisons and promised a strong high. Others keefed the weed to steal the trichromes, or sold already vaporized product depleted of THC. Soaking cheap, brick weed in flavored oils meant they could call it Blueberry Kush and promise it was primo. Dipping the roots of mid-grade weed in cold water meant a drastic color change and gave license to promote it as purple haze. Fake crystals, bags weighted with glue, rigged scales—most outdoor weed was pissed on and around as a cheap bug repellant. Henna, valium, & plastic was cut into batches of hashish—bags
weighted down with glass shards; the ruthless carelessness of it was unmatched. Pinched and stepped on—the streets held medicines stretched with poisons.

Cannabis has always been America's #1 cash crop and favorite outlawed pastime. New moonshiners formed networks that employed, sustained, and bankrolled whole rural communities in secrecy. People operating outside the law have been doing so for years, gleefully: networks of ordinary people doing illegal things. Thousands of dealers in a small city—far fewer unique suppliers. Trucks, planes, trains—they all brought drugs into every city every single day. Growers would package their product discreetly, then pay other people to do their shipping bidding: different faces, new post offices every time, fake return addresses—every base covered. Thousands of dollars of cash, hidden in appliances and wrapped in tin foil, arrived at various spots all over town for the grow op.

The Post Office used to be a safe option, but with recent crackdowns, the failure rate was up and mailing anything out had become an unacceptable risk. If you weren't careful, dogs could hit on anything—even money simply smoked around, or handled by fingertips crusted with a hint of resin. If the dogs hit on something in a USPS-mailed package, you'd get a call from the postal inspector and they'd either invite you to come stake your claim to any intercepted weed, or simply tell you they're keeping the fruit of their suspicious labors if they found a large, hidden sum of money. The game was strong, business was booming—though the rules were changing rapidly. Everyone was rushing to wrap their fingers around a fantasy before it was too late.

In that glorious grey area of a nation newly divided between legalization, decriminalization, and un faltering faith in prohibition, there was much money to be made. Hopeful people struck out on marijuana land races gathering precious seeds, while fedora’d pot
dealers stretched out to the suburbs to spread the amotivational leaf at a higher price; the possibilities were endless.

The formula was the same as for anything else: produce, transport, distribute. By early 2013, the price of marijuana had nearly doubled in spite of the higher rates of domestic production. It cost $100 to grow a pound of weed; that same pound sold for $3000-$4500 to the middle man, who could tack on anywhere from $25-250 an ounce for inflation. Sold as $20 gram bags, that same $100 pound was worth $9000 when it hit the East Coast streets—this was the ‘War on Drugs Tax’. Governments enabled cartels and gangs to print money with cannabis; from busts, police agencies acquired assets or proceeds and absorbed the money into their budgets. Millions of dollars were laundered through casinos each year. It was all a game. Some got rich; others sat caged, feeding the privatized prison industry while their homes and cars nourished the waning Drug War. Full jailhouses meant it was cheaper to plead guilty. Then, there were the sick: left to choose between persecution and deprivation.

Medically legal in several states by then, it was still better not to have your name on a list... “Make them work for their subpoena!” old men would joke with the young, “Or you’ll end up like they did in California—with those zip-tied wrists.” They waited through neuropathic pains for the day they could legally cure their conditions and ease their unending, reoccurring agonies. Human suffering has always meant big business; continued prohibition provided a sustainable model for profit from misery.

Andy was just passing through—stoned, but coherent—and fresh from Colorado. “We can take 600 dollars gas money—pop a few dexies, drive straight through to Colorado, and however much cash we have—with a reliable car and a trustworthy face making it through the center of the country, we multiply it 5-fold on the East Coast,” he said.
“You just follow some simple rules,” he continued—“Don’t speed, don’t drive fucked up, don’t have anything that isn’t double vacuum-sealed and hidden inside a part of your vehicle that won’t open easily, always stop at night and get a motel room when heading back—and for the love of god, don’t run any lights or drive over any lines. It’s always the stupid mistake you could have avoided that gets you in trouble. Just do whatever it takes to get by unnoticed; if there’s two of you in a car, dress like missionaries—just one, travel in a suitjacket with a religious station programmed into the radio. You know—shit like that.”

Construction zones, speed traps, and the trouble of Kansas—where you’re a suspect before citizen—flashed before Cassidy’s eyes.

“Think about it,” he went on, “your income is limited only by how much money you can put up at the front... and with each trip, it’ll be a little more. You know how dry it can get here; if not for us, people would always just be sitting around waiting on drugs that would never come.” He spoke with shifting, glassy eyes.

“Why don’t you just send someone who doesn’t know there’s anything in the car?” she asked.

“I’ve tried that—sending strangers with the car—that’s how I lost one car; the prick must’ve pried open a panel and realized what he was sitting on because he fucking never showed up.” Andy recalled his defeat bitterly. “Listen—you show up, give them your car for a day, hang out, smoke weed, sleep on a couch—then bright and early when normal people wake up for work, you head out and join the rat-racers.”

“Give them my car?” Cassidy was very attached to her old junker of a Toyota.
“It has to be your car. They’ll just pop off the side-panels and line the doors with double vacuum-sealed weed. It’s safe. People do it all the time.”

“Why don’t we take your car? Mine’s pretty old.”

“I just can’t—too many trips, ya know? Too many cameras everywhere logging license plates. They have algorithms that detect patterns and stuff like that. The goal is not to wind up on any kind of list—keep your head down and don’t give the government a reason to track you. I try to only make one trip a year. And when I do, it’s a big one. But there’s never enough, I can only fit so much, and I always need more stuff before I can go back. If business comes to a halt, well—that’s no good.”

He could see she was still unsure. “Listen, it pays half a pound, plus whatever you can afford out there, you can bring back and sell. If you’re good and make a few trips without any issues, we’ll set you up with a new car with compartments that’ll never be found.”

Her apprehension melted away; she had a trip to plan.

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The last thing travelers see of New York state when heading west on route 90 is a giant Adult World with a loaded lot of bigrigs. It was a 28-hour trip at the proper speedlimit. Cassidy was on her first solo drive—sent by Andy to pick up a few primo pounds, but she was mostly running bud back to New York that dispensaries wouldn’t take because of contamination or mites or fungi or mold or chemicals used in the growing process. Flowers rejected by dispensaries went off to medicate the eager, restless populous of some state still caught in prohibition at high risk and great profit.
She went about the trip calmly, smiling at a table full of construction workers at a rest stop. A family stood in the parking lot—a little boy waved his arms at an exiting truck as it approached, and it blew its horn to the boy’s delight. A sign struck her as she pulled away from the ramp: *Drug Activity Impairs Drivers: call #677*

Eyes were everywhere. She was careful not to smoke carelessly, but knew that smoking was not allowed on the return trip and was determined to drive as high as possible for as long as possible. She drove, clutching a lighter, lowering her bowl every time she passed one of the empty electric highway signs rigged with cameras capturing the movements of unsuspecting motorists. Her sleeves were rolled up—easier to hold the steering wheel with the flesh of her elbows while she hit the bowl. Moving between rows of cars keeping different tempos, she weaved to a beat all her own—eyes behind rather than checking blind spots to the side, pulling between two SUVs for cover, she drove into a sunset sprawled out like a painting before her—past the dead thirsty eyes of a parked police car—the officer leaning on his open door, radar gun aimed at every passing suspect.

She scanned the lanes behind her for cop cruisers, settling her speed to the exact limit in sight of fast, boldly moving vehicles approaching from behind. In Amish country, she pulled off to take scenic Route 20 for a while and a horse-drawn carriage in a center turning lane was going mad. A caterpillar cocoon was stuck on her windshield wipers, desperately trying to come away from the trip unscathed, as well.

Cassidy arrived at her destination in the early evening—careful to erase her GPS before she got out of the car, just as Andy had commanded. He was the expert—she was taking his cues. The first thing she noticed once ushered inside by two ordinary-looking men was a large
scale strewn with orange hairs and debris from maybe hundreds of pounds of weed measured out.

At the operation, the crew ranged from dredded heads to expensive suitjackets. Purple standing budding flowers greeted her with silky, reflective, glistening resin. An assortment of different extracts sat in an unhinged metal box. They used a microscope to judge the weed and ushered her close to show her how. The beauty of the crystals magnified in sunlight was unexpected—she saw the drug in a whole new way. The grow house was nearby to an airforce base, so jets would fly closely overhead all day long, setting off car alarms and disturbing the peace.

Outside it was a normal cul-de-saced home. Inside, the house reeked of fresh marijuana because they were in the process of harvesting. The hope was that the breeze would take it in all different directions; the other hope was that no one cared—it was legal there. While there were cameras and tripwires and gunmen waiting for you in the wild grow ops in the woods of California, no one here felt the need to rig their basements against intruders. They were just living their lives.

Upstairs, the house looked normal—perfectly average and filled with furniture. But paraphernalia and bud festooned every table in the room, amounting to 16 or so jars filled with buds, keefe, wax, and hash—a glut of marijuana on every granite kitchen countertop, coffeetable, and bedroom nightstand.

Downstairs there were 4 zipper-sealed rooms all lined with white material—each room a different temperature containing plants on different cycles. In the growroom were rows of plants and stacks of vertical planters all under bright lights and catered to by rotating fans. Her cell phone glowed oddly under the artificial spectrum. In the veg room there were expendable
motherplants in line for the slaughter once their genetics were saved in the form of cut clones.

A corner closet was filled with wire hangers of weed stalks hung upside down to dry. Buckets of water sat stagnant, prepared with chemical formulas for the thirsty plants.

Growers rented space from other growers; everyone was hungry for an extra income: waiters would get off work and go tend to their plants, family men would sneak off in the night to tan under grow lamps. Legalization in Colorado made all this possible. No suspicions existed as long as you got solar panels or kept your monthly electric bill under 1000 dollars, then no red flags were raised. They took shifts tirelessly guarding against spider mites and mixing endless nutrient solutions in the dark of the artificial evening, night vision ear pieces showing the way.

A small red-haired guy was yanking clones from red plastic cups with holes cut in the bottoms.

“Bigger roots, bigger fruits,” he said and smiled, holding out a clone with an unacceptable root system before tossing it carelessly in a nearby garbage bag.

Later, ashing on the peeling paint of a wooden deck, they crouched around a joint with stories making the rounds. They spoke of plans—investments: a $600 auto cloner, a $500 volcano vaporizer, a $25,000 machine to make wax from the pounds and pounds of trimmed leaves and rotted buds that would never wind up in a dime bag now with today’s new high standards.

The next day, she got a tour from that same red-haired trimmer. She learned that a few trimmers, such as himself, were working for free at the house in exchange for a room and
the chance to be apprentices to the master growers renting space. They were there for an education.

Where she had imagined police dogs strolling through neighborhoods in search of big grows, she was met with conspicuous solar panels on almost every roof. Riding up to the house in Colorado he pointed out the sights:

“That guy’s ex-cartel, but he’s always outside playing with his kids or home alone—so he’s out... maybe in hiding.” He laughed as he pointed to a house in their neighborhood with obvious Spanish influences in the walkway stonework and surrounding saint statues.

“A lot of Mexican cartel activity here—you don’t want to mess with those guys. They drive up from Texas in ‘suped up trucks and drive back with more shit stuffed into those things than you would ever believe.”

He continued to wave his hands as they drove down the block. “They’re growing—we traded a couple clones a few days ago and they looked good. And, ooh shit, get a look at the solar panels on that house—those things cost a fortune. Haha, oh yea, and that house over there—that guy’s a cop. He comes home in a uniform and everything at six o’clock. We try not to be outside around then. It’s all about keeping the neighborhood quiet and keeping your neighbors at a distance.”

No place would ever be like Colorado when it came to the sheer number of neighborhood grow operations: solar panels covering the roofs of every other house, family men talking about gavitas on sidewalks while their kids rode bikes around their cul-de-sac... cannabis legalization had monumentally reshaped life in Colorado. The number of jobs it created, both under the table and entirely aboveboard, was riveting: delivery guys, growers,
trimmers, grow room consultations, car disassembly and reassembly, compartment installation... the list went on. The Colorado economy flourished. Now buildings were going up everywhere and small businesses were flocking to fill once-empty empty storefronts.

Nearby were the Indian casinos filled with gangsters scratching itches they probably wouldn’t have had if not for the need to clean their money. Cassidy accompanied her tour guide to a casino; he said he just had to make a quick run. Those stale rooms were filled with agitated, red-eyed, chainsmoking balls of hope and loss rubber-banded together.

Outside, there was a man sitting on a bench smoking hash from a vapor pen.

“You know what this is?” he asked Cassidy.

“An E-cig?”

“Nope,” he corrected her. “It’s pot.”

She laughed politely at the admission.

“Do you want some?” he asked.

“No thanks,” she replied, not willing to share spit with a stranger.

“Your loss,” he said, before he put the device in his pocket and left to rejoin the other masses hedging bets.

On the drive back, they passed dispensary after dispensary.

“I had no idea it would be like this. There’s weed for sale everywhere. A guy in his sixties even offered to smoke me up at the casino,” she recapped, amazed at the legitimacy of her family’s hobby in Colorado.
“Yeah, but you don’t want anything from a dispensary, especially if it’s recreational—it’ll have way less THC. People out here like to support neighborhood microbrews of weed. Dispensaries are for tourists.”

“Geez, has it really gotten so crazy here in less than a year since legalization?”

“I grew up a few towns over. It’s never really been a big deal to smoke around here. Once in high school a school cop walked up on us smoking in a parked car. He says, ‘I know you’re smoking over here. I have someplace better to be, but unfortunately I’m out of weed,’ and then proceeded to take half our bag.”

“Ha, that’s crazy. In New York it would’ve been a possession charge and pretty much would have ruined your life.”

“Yeah. When they first legalized medicinally around here, it was a lot of paperwork and effort, and when you finally got approval to make a purchase it was $50 for a half an eighth—twice what it is now. Then a few years later, it was ridiculous—they loosened up so much that all you had to do was walk in, have a full wallet, and say your feet hurt. They’d sit you down and give you a form to fill out with the cost at the top in big, bold letters. Then a doctor would walk out, look around, and ask, ‘You all paid your fees, right?’ She’d leave, a nurse would come out to collect an additional fee. Then she said, ‘you’ll get your temporary med card in 90 days, in a year—you renew for a permanent one,’ and it was done. Now, they’re strict again. If you’re a med patient and you’re not growing yourself, you have to give your growing rights to someone else and make it all official—paperwork and everything. Better to stay off the grid.”

“Is anything at the house official?” Cassidy asked.
“No. No one’s paying attention to all that. In New York, I have buddies who are afraid to go to growstores because they’ll get followed home. But here, everybody’s doing it. It’s holding the economy up. Weed’s here to stay. We can do what we want.”

The car loaded, she set out the next day—the risk palpable. This was not small time; the obligatory drug survey when you got in a vehicle would not do. Everything in her car, she had to trust, had been packaged appropriately. The day before, her Toyota had been disassembled in a private garage, then reassembled with weed hidden in every conceivable crevice. She was traveling surrounded by buds that sold for paper that represented gold that simply didn’t exist in that vault that every American had blind confidence in.

She paraded down the highway in a car lined with 25 pounds of the finest BubbaKush, Girl Scout Cookie, and Durban Poison NYS would see in a long while. Kansas was the scariest state to travel through—like going into Mexico, except in Kansas the troopers had nothing better to do. All along the interstate cops hid in tall grasses waiting for the hint of something suspicious; they tore cars apart, high on the sheer aggression of it—dug into engines and looked for packages in gas tanks, disassembling them beyond repair.

The first few times when you’re pulled over with drugs, you sweat—a lot. You stumble over words. You forget to smile. But they mostly catch the careless—not the career criminals. And each time you successfully pull the wool over their beady, hungry cop eyes, you grow confident—you grow invincible.

But she was always only seven minutes from trouble; at any given time there was a cop or some danger within seven minutes of her, or closer. There were squadcars at blind crossings, cops waiting at U-turns, radar guns aimed from overpasses or from hills in church
parking lot corners, where they sat running license plates from a laptop on their dash. You had to know the law of the land, and each state was different—like in Pennsylvania, you’d never see a cop hiding under an underpass or along a highway because they have laws against entrapment. But, in most states—especially in the middle of the country—anything was game if they saw fit to make it so.

Most cars with out-of-state plates driven by young males were pulled over for minor offenses like going 3 miles over the speedlimit. The sunglasses always on, the officer would say something along the lines of: “Well boy, you were outside the legal limit. That’s all the probable cause I need. But, additionally, we’ve had reports of suspicious activity linked to a vehicle matching your description. Now, tell me, where are you headed this evening?” You are not from here. You are up to no good. Then came the obligatory: “Step out of the vehicle, please.”

Rental cars raised a barrage of questions—Andy told her he had learned that lesson the hard way when he got pulled over in one. “Well I’ve never heard of that—the right to question rental cars...” he had started to say.

“It’s new policy. Now, you wouldn’t be carrying anything illegal, would you? Are there any drugs in the car?”

“No, sir.” Show no weakness—never waver in putting forth the belief that you are committing no crimes—if you do, it gives them license to fuck with you, simple as having something dangling from your mirror or a broken taillight.
“How much money do you have in the vehicle?” would be the next question. *Our Police Station could use a new espresso machine—so if you have a sum in your wallet that we deem unacceptable, you’re buying.*

But Cassidy made a good runner; no one suspected her, so no one worried she’d ever be in the position to give anyone up. They don’t arrest people in argyle unless they have a hell of a case. She was no one—nobody... on her way from a job interview, or headed home after visiting some friends, or scouting out colleges, or visiting family—maybe she had a sick grandma out in Boulder, but she certainly didn’t look the type to deliver drugs across state borders—that was unthinkable.

Once when Cassidy was pulled over for 5 miles above; the cop walked up to the car and after scrutinizing her license and faded registration declared: “I’m looking for trouble. You don’t look like trouble. Are you trouble?”

“No, sir,” she said and put on her best nervous smile.

“Well, then, good. Keep it that way. And slow down.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Always glancing in her rearview, always alert—there was no flawless way to avoid brushes with authority. Every so often she’d find herself in front of a police car. It was one thing when she thought they were coming for her when she was on her home turf—she’d spray some air freshener, mind the blinds, and hide all her bongs under her bed before attributing it all to a mild case of paranoia—but it was another thing entirely when they were behind her... blue car, lights on top—a New York state trooper.
Every squadcar equipped with a camera and computer by then, they’d already scanned her plate. He drove slowly, so she kept in pace. He had nowhere better to be, so she pretended to be going nowhere fast—both just fine with cruising along. Her plate was clean; there was no reason for him to suspect her of anything—no purpose to her panic... but still, the idea that some new information was recently uncovered always nagged at her. But, he’d pull off, and the drugs drove on safely in the shadows of her trunk or glovebox or custom-installed stash compartment—depending on the vehicle.

Overtired, she’d sometimes be compelled to distraction by the shadows of great birds passing over the highway at dusk. On dirt backroads, through gateless traincrossings, she escaped the highways that carved through the valleys and finally, she hit the vast dirt mounds surrounding her New York town; they were turned to mud. She was home—another successful score.
Little thought goes into the objects we touch as we muddle through our days... kitchen knife, sink faucet, door handle, purse string, sweeping our hands down metal railings down a flight of stairs, the trunks of our cars... always dropping skin cells and microscopic evidence in our wake.

Andy had taken to dabbing—the new crack of THC. “When you dab, you inhale pure THC oil concentrates,” he had explained to an eager Cassidy the year before while setting up her first dab. She coughed uncontrollably.

The dogs were there for a random spot inspection at the toll booth. It was a car owned by his mother and his story was that he was driving it back to her. It was lined with $30,000 in coke and $20,000 in vacuum packed weed. It was his own personal dabbing habit that got him caught in the end; the dogs picked up the scent of the concentrated drug from fingerprints on his trunk handle—and that was all it took.

They tested it with a droplet from a roadside arrest kit and confirmed THC. Then, the car was theirs to break down however they wished.

750,000 people get arrested for the plant each year—most of them for simple possession. The more names he gave, the easier they’d consider going—that was the deal.

When it first came down the pipeline via text from a mutual friend that Andy had been apprehended, Cassidy imagined the worst for a very complicated 60 seconds. And in that time, she felt her freedom taken from her; her retinas formed shadows of cell bars, and it was the only pattern she could see in every direction she looked.
Everyone knew what went down when they picked someone up: pulled into a tiny room, you’re given a glass of water under a fluorescent bulb—or maybe the typical spotlight—and you sell out however many people you can depending on your crime, with the understanding that ‘three will (usually) set you free’.

She thought they’d be on their way to get her in minutes, or within hours. The immediacy of the situation struck her hard and took its toll quickly; there’s a certain way your heart races when you think they’re on their way to get you—a tightness in the chest that comes from being there in that spot, and there’s only one form of relief...

When you think your freedom to fall from the wagon at any time is about to be taken from you, it tends to push you off.

In sobriety, Cassidy never felt it simpler to keep a dry household; she always had an unopened bottle hidden somewhere. At 65 seconds she was headed for her reserve liquor. She took the handle of whiskey out of her bathroom drawer, where it hadn’t garnered much attention over the years, but had provided a certain level of comfort. She held it for a moment before swigging.

Another minute went by and she was glancing through her curtains, nervously molesting her blinds through the forceful pounding of her heart racing, wondering if their knock would be as fierce as she was afraid it would be. Would they bust in her door? How many would they send? Would they be armed to the teeth?

_No...Sudden...Movements_...

She broke. And when you break, it isn't just a sip you take... the world is different when you fall off the wagon: every stuttered motion, every lack of grace, blamed on the fall. So
many eyes—too many, maybe always. So you hide—that’s how you know you’re an addict. But if you really listen, you know after the first alteration—that first hit, that first shot, that first high... you know from the way your craving drives you from that moment on.

But, paranoia eventually begets rational thought and logic casts itself over panic if you’re not already too far gone. They weren’t going to show up on her doorstep; she hadn’t even spoken with Andy in months, and they always texted in code to avoid incrimination.

Rationality aside and her sober years already broken, a half hour later and she was sitting outside the liquor store, knowing everything it would mean if she went in; soon she’d be backwashing into 1liter liquor bottles. After straight liquor binges, the chaser would give her chills for days; she’d walk with the poor balance of the inebriated denier. You break, and you wake up inoperable for the rest of the next day, you swear it off, you cycle through this, all inspired by those first few precious moments when you nervously waited for the alcohol to hit you.

Bill W. asked for a drink on his death bed. It became a game of time, of counting—intelligent calculations that grew sloppy as she dug deeper, tolerance rising. All that time spent sitting in parking lots outside of liquor stores, because once she went in, it was all over—the place wasn't so scary anymore—she’d know what wall to walk to for her favorite whiskey, and the task would be made simple. She sat watching the boy in the liquor store in his grey sweatshirt with his sad eyes, pacing behind the countertop...

She caught that same grey-sweatshirted boy watching her in the reflection of the door as it swung shut. She folded down the top of the paperbag and slipped it in her purse; in her
car, the wrapper on the liquor bottle cut her finger by the nailbed. Cassidy squeezed it against her steering wheel until it turned purple and she was sure it hurt the most it could.

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John found a job at an IT department for 35,000 a year, after a long stint of underpaid asbestos removals following the court case all those years ago. Marie resentfully took a job in Accounts Payable, and Cassidy slung expensive jewelry in Westchester during the day. At night she called old friends who were still around in an attempt to feel less alone. She’d plan it out carefully—her secret drinks here and there—always attempting to avoid creating alarm for her conditions. The people she knew who were still creeping around her hometown were the unsavory sort—the ones who didn’t make it.

“Hey, did you hear? There was another heroin overdose. Fuckin’ Reese Barto, man,” said an old schoolmate and fellow dealer, Alan.

“Yeah. I used to drink in his basement in high school. His mom was really nice. She’d make us breakfast when we woke up in groups and crawled out of his basement.” They would wander up to the kitchen in a clumsy search for juvenile hangover cures, and she always had suggestions to try and help.

“Yeah, shit, man—I know. Everyone knows an overdose now—or, used to. It’s that pure shit that’s going around—twice as strong, for real; it’s cut with fentanyl. Shit, baking soda was safer. And fucking people are stupid; the prices are always so up and down, so they don’t know what they got.”
"Or they do, and they just take too much. It’s a fucking waste," Cassidy declared—ready to be done with the heroin craze around her. Aside from rehab, she never touched the stuff again. She had seen too many addicts she feared becoming.

“A fuckin’ waste of good customers,” he said smirking, and reached for his cigarettes. He lipped the end and took out a small baggie, rolling his spit-soaked stoge in the coke. He lit it and squinted, holding his breath for as long as he could before taking another drag and then offering her the tailend of his investment in being high at that very moment.

He looked up at Cassidy, who was staring at his hands and clarified, “I didn’t sell him the shit that killed him, if that’s what you’re thinking. I make sure my bags come with a warning nowadays.”

The crackdown on prescription drugs and the war on marijuana led to a rise in heroin use. By 2014, ⅓ of all national heroin seizures were in New York State. But the black tar sped through the system and anyone with 24-hours notice never tested positive. The heroin plague of the present harkened back to the crack epidemic of the 80’s—it was anywhere and everywhere. Any 8th grader could tell you that heroin was easier to get than weed. The ketamine-holers of the previous generation turned to their veins, while pills and powders had hold of the rest. The narcoleptic trials of an adderall nation had already taken place—no one was naturally where they needed to be anymore, no one was ever set at the right speed. Codex Alimetarius would fix them up, but a cure would cut the industry at its knees. The great anhedonia reign—the ticking of a calm heart now strange to those who had forgotten how it beat before the arrhythmia of holding in hits for far too long.
“Three deaths last week—all connected to the same ‘BreakingBad’ shit, they said on the news,” Cassidy informed him.

“Yeah. Bad batch. Bad news. Fucking dealers all think they’re chemists now, playing around in shit they ain’t supposed to be messing with—knockin’ the natural balance out of whack. Now the cops are out for blood—fucking K-9 units doing more checkpoints and shit.”

“In Reese’s obituary,” Cassidy continued talking about her fallen friend, “they made a point of saying he was a member of AA for 7 years. I didn’t know that. We lost touch. But it’s weird to think about—him at those meetings, standing up and talking about how it all started at his basement parties.”

“Maybe you’re a celebrity already at the AA meetings,” Alan joked.

“Fuck AA. But I guess sometimes, you can do everything right, and still—the worst possible scenario plays out, ya know? Sometimes you can know it’s good stuff, and still do too much of it. You just wanted a little more of a taste... you calculated wrong... you had it all under control, until you didn’t anymore, and, well, fuck... you know people like us.” Others dedicated their lives to ruminating over all the things that went wrong, all the substances to stay away from; and a third breed didn’t give a second thought to any of it.

A memorial bar crawl seemed like an innocent proposal.

Soon again empty liquor shooters filled her glovecompartment; she began spending her drives up from her part-time jewelry job in Westchester drunk. When inebriated, the sirens were never for her; but when she was high, they were always coming to get her. Alcohol soothed her from the threatening nature of ordinary objects: coffee without filters, plastic
water bottles, lipglosses of petroleum, BPA in every little thing—poison everywhere. She believed in her ability to keep her faculties about her when driving drunk, while her sober life could be reduced to a cycle of irrational fears and nights filled with alarms that weren’t really there.

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The accident was inevitable and happened in Connecticut at Christmastime; the snow was coming down hard. She could have been trying to kill herself, or she could have been trying to look at a shooting star; she would never conclusively know—that’s the trouble of a blackout.

John sensed that something was wrong; Cassidy had been gone too long.

The caller ID said Private Caller. “...I was, well, I was driving behind her and she was obviously having a hard time. Plus, it’s a tricky road; do you know route 32?”

He knew it well. Sometimes on his long trek home he’d take the backroads through Connecticut and he frequently smoked on that road. She was only 10 minutes from the border of NY and Connecticut—13 minutes from home. Her car was upside down and crushed against a hill. He couldn’t conceive of how the driver’s side remained unscathed. Cassidy had already been taken to the hospital but the officer assured him she was fine, though she had climbed from the car and proceeded to try and walk away from the officers when they arrived. A large bottle of vodka was nearby on the snow-covered pavement; the officer kicked it back toward the car while he filled John in on the incident.

One wreck is mostly like any other—metal twisted in ways it shouldn’t be, glass in gravel, snapped plastic pieces. This one was no different... except for the things. There were
things *everywhere*. Her car was filled with shoes and clothes and items she needed when she rotated from one sanctuary to the next with her holy bottles and head full of unpretty problems to turn a numb, blind eye to. There were things scattered all over the road—a collection of sorts. Since she had been drinking, she often avoided her parents and slept at friend’s houses, or just passed out where she found herself until awake again and reenergized for the saunter home.

Your body bends to your addiction—adjusts, until you stretch too far out to do anything but break. She wrecked her car with a blood alcohol level of .38, a level that would have killed most anybody else—certainly a 110 lb girl whose body hadn’t already trained itself to function effectively under such a large influence.

Cassidy awoke each morning after the wreck with the panic of a dry drunk. The fog held the Metronorth train horn that morning as she drove north in a car borrowed from her parents. Connecticut had an agreement with Vermont where it sent its first-time offenders up the East Coast to spend a weekend at an alcohol reeducation program. The drive was pleasant; the destination was her new prison.

Different from the Villa, no one was there because they wanted to be. Everyone there was there for a DUI—and they all came from varying states. There were narrow hallways and faux wood paneling, a common area with a small television and bear skin blankets lining the walls, and a small kitchenette to make the transitory, deviant men and women more at home.

The sessions were more educational than the Villa’s heavyhanded emotional approach toward healing. They were attended by all—men and women from the small group of 24 lawbreakers, and four counselors. Fact after fact was poured into them—statistic after statistic of
deaths and imprisonments and risk factors to fill a house with. Cassidy was again one of the youngest attendees, but having already played this role before, she quickly took to the program and impressed the counselors.

Cassidy channeled her old roommate Toni—with all her assertions of rehabilitation and delighted participation in the program, but still fiending and plotting for a fix behind closed doors. She played the role of the counselor’s pet masterfully; she had heard it all before.

“You would be a real asset to a program like this,” one counselor said to Cassidy after she gave an outstandingly textbook response to a question about alcoholism.

Later, in her half-hour session with the program’s shrink, she was wringing her hands uncontrollably while trying to focus on not revealing too much.

“What were you trying to do?” the woman asked.

“I don’t know. I was driving to thrift stores to Christmas shop.”

“But why were you drinking, then, if you were only shopping?”

“I don’t know. I was in a bad state,” Cassidy answered hesitantly.

“Do you ever have thoughts of killing yourself?”

Cassidy paused. To say yes was to send up a red flag, so she went with an answer she thought was safe: “Well, doesn’t everybody sometimes?”

“No,” the counselor answered firmly with an unchanged expression. Then she asked, “Have you ever heard of a condition called bipolar mood disorder? It often accompanies the type of anxieties and risky behaviors you’re describing.”
The stranger in this half hour session wanted to patch up the gaping hole in Cassidy’s potential—the one letting her future seep out. The medications, when properly researched, proved extreme and not recommended, and in most cases were entirely off-label: anti-psychotics, anti-depressants, anti-seizure medications... all responsible for the plastered smiles of stoned placation on so many members of Cassidy’s generation. She took the pamphlets on medications and mood disorders—all they could offer at that lawbreakers’ weekend retreat.

From the cabin they were crammed in for 3 days together, at exactly noon when they were allowed to leave, there was a mass exodus—sweeping down the wooden deck stairs and out to their cars or waiting rides home and away from this temporary break with reality and their own beds, eager for all the trappings of home.

Cassidy parked at a Walmart a few miles away and packed the bowl she had hidden in her glove compartment—only worried for a moment that the counselors would alert the cops to be on the lookout for a blonde who in all likelihood faked her grand reformation and was once again a danger to herself and others.

When home again, drinking was no longer an option. The financial blow of losing her car was enough to impede any desire to drink in her immediate future. But she was not well; never recovered— she was only ever distracted. She adopted her father’s marijuana maintenance plan and smoked to quell her racing thoughts of the normopathy of sobriety. She began again, surfing substances—one desired effect to the next, like skipping stones. The best high was the one she staved off for as long as possible: resisting tolerances, playing with alternatives, staying in control. She experimented with supplements: Kava Kava, Passionflower, 5-htp, Sam-E, St. John’s Wort... and, of course, marijuana. There was evidence all around her that she had finally gotten herself together.
Living at home with her parents wasn’t so bad. There was the home she remembered from childhood—the illusion in which she drew her unhappiness and drowned herself in idle illnesses of circular thoughts. But she always had a shelter, and a home. Now, it stood crumbling. She counted days and helped in the grow room, though her father’s operation paled in comparison to what she had seen on her expeditions out west—now halted by the destruction of her car and Andy’s arrest.
“If they’re coming, let them come. But I’m telling you, they won’t.” John tried to reason with his wife over her latest concerns following newsreports of unchecked civil seizures in every local district, every state—every precinct wanted a chance to pad their budgets with drug money. In any seizure where drugs were alleged to in some way be involved, property is considered guilty until proven innocent—and by then, cash or electronics confiscated on a roadside would have already disappeared.

“How can you even say that? And how can you be so sure? We could lose everything. They could take our house if they want. And for what?” Marie demanded.

“We won’t lose anything. You’re worried for no reason. There’s a greater good here—that’s what I’m taking risks for.” John was confident.

“That’s bullshit. And it’ll be at the expense of everyone else around you. It’s time to stop growing. It’s too risky.”

“Ma,” Cassidy interjected, “I’ll tell you what’s going on—it’s my fault. Dad thinks that if I stop smoking pot, I’ll go nuts and start drinking or something.”


“Where are we going?” Marie asked.

“Camp Ramahpo. If you want me to stop growing after you meet my friend Mike, then I will.”
Mike greeted them at the gate standing beside a golfcart and climbed into their backseat. He opened the doors to the maintenance building and Marie and Cassidy were confronted with an unbelievable number of stacked plants.

“Seventy-five percent of these are CBD-high strains. People aren’t growing this stuff as much because there’s a higher demand for the THC-high strains. The same love and care of hybridization and so on isn’t being put into these types of plants. But here we can fit 100 plants because of the vertical grow hydroponic setup.” Mike spoke passionately about his grow operation.

“I thought it was all THC. What’s CBD? What’s the difference?” Marie asked.

“The CBD-high strains help best with seizures, especially for children, because you don’t feel the psychoactive properties as much—just pain relief. Our group’s doctors have lists of patients—mostly children of families who can’t receive marijuana legally. Their parents could go to jail if caught bringing it across borders into their home states. These plants are for them.”

Marie and Cassidy just nodded, still looking around at the vats of nutrient solution and taking in the scene.

“Elderly folks in pain, cancer patients, suffering children—they’re the new face of legalization. Have you heard of all the medical marijuana refugees? I mean, what the hell do we expect? These people—these families—they’ve relocated, or divided—uprooted everything, leaving jobs and family and friends and lives to live in shelters and stay with the people who are kind enough to open their homes to strangers in the face of this federal atrocity. Do we really expect them to fight? They’ve been so angry at their own circumstances for so long, now that
they’ve found some relief, can we really expect them to get angry enough at the hoops they had to face—that they still have to face—just to get access to something curative? Do we expect them to speak, to protest—even though they’re tired? Expect them to fight, even though the most important fight of their lives finally gifted them with room to breathe? And now we expect them to exhale a war cry? It shouldn’t go on like this; this is the real cannabis madness, and it has to come to an end. Why let anyone else suffer?”

“But they just approved of medical marijuana in New York a few weeks ago; in a year and a half, it’ll all be different. Are you going to make this all official? Get a badge or whatever you have to apply for, pay the costs, and not have to worry?” Cassidy asked Mike.

They were all sitting down now and passing a pipe between them. Mike passed it to Marie, and then answered unalteringly, as though he’d imagined the possibility of seeking government approval a hundred times, and each time immediately refused to entertain the idea of coming clean with Uncle Sam.

“No—because then my name’s on a list. I don’t want my name on that kind of list—not until it’s legal federally. The government could change its mind in two seconds- and there I am, on a list, just like all those poor growers in California. I mean, New York’s medical marijuana bill has been considered every year since 1997; just because it passed, it doesn’t mean that we’re safe.”

“Since 1997?” Marie echoed, surprised.

“Yep. Another fun fact is that the government has held the patent for marijuana’s neuroprotective and antioxidant properties since fuckin’ 2003. Yet, over a decade later, they’re still seizing, prosecuting, & persecuting state-sanctioned operations. I think that the moment
the government realized the potential of cannabis as a medicine, it had an obligation not only to allow the discussion to be heard on a national stage, but to push for an open and honest dialogue—and to allow and fund research that would examine the need for further policy change, rather than hide behind old laws. It’s wrong that it’s still a federal crime, but that’s the reality. When federal policy changes, when our work is no longer the felony that it never should have been—then it’ll all be worth it. And, finally, people will know the truth about cannabis."
Neurogenesis

1.

Sitting in a borrowed car near the highway exit, Cassidy searched furiously for a lighter in her purse with a cigarette in her mouth. She was startled when she realized the resident sidewalk sitter had abandoned his sign and was approaching her window with a plastic cup outstretched in his hand. She was reluctant to roll her window down. She didn’t have any money, but she did have two unsmoked joints in her mother’s cupholder. So, she handed one through the crack before he had a chance to ask for anything different. He looked at it hesitantly.

“It’s all I have—take it if you want it. It’s good,” she promised. Cassidy didn’t realize how difficult it would be to give weed away—she had never tried before.

“Thanks, but No thanks, girl,” he said and stepped away from her car to make his way down the line forming behind her at the off-ramp. She made her right turn with the joint still in her fingers, then slid it into the center console.

Cassidy was on her way to pick her mother up for chemo.

“Did you roll me a joint for after?” Marie asked, as she situated herself in the car and flipped open the visor mirror to check that her wig was on straight still, despite the sharp wind that struck them as Cassidy walked arm in arm with her from the front door to her car.

“Yep, I rolled two,” Cassidy confirmed with a wave of her hand to the console where they sat in plain sight.
“Thanks.  It’ll be in celebration.  I can’t wait to get this one finished.  This is the last round of the really bad stuff.”

“I know.  No more Red Devil.  It’s a big day.  That’s why I rolled two.”

“Thanks, honey.  I just wanted to be sure to have some for the car ride home,” Marie said as she rolled her fingers in circular motions on her temples.

Marie’s body betrayed her months before when she saw a lump in the mirror, only fifty-three years into a life of settling and regrouping after harsh blows.  At a follow-up appointment to a worrisome mammogram, the doctor told her that her results looked ‘positive’; the doctor’s tone unreadable, she mistakenly thought he was telling her everything looked okay before he ripped that moment away and corrected her sigh of relief.  John did not accompany Marie to the appointment, and she’d never forgive his absence.  Now, he always made sure she had pot available to her.

It was a new age for chemo, but the transformation the body goes through when pumped full of poisons was still just as overwhelming.  They gave her far more pain pills than she’d ever need, and then expected her to self-regulate.  But Marie wanted weed, not the unholy pharmaceutical concoctions that made her bloat or sick or could leave her heart far weaker than it was ever meant to be.  She missed wine.  She missed health.  She began smoking and vaporizing weed—it seemed only natural; instantly it hit her major centers: appetite, pain, memory.  She preferred the great quest for anatamine to be fulfilled with sweet sensemilla of any quality, from the the midi of the middle American attic operations, to the 25% THC stuff that Cassidy made materialize every so often through sympathetic old friends in Colorado.  Every little high helped ease the pains of Marie’s cancer and the treatments her new doctors were putting her through.
“Did you grab the mail on your way in?” Marie asked as they got into the car for the 30-minute ride to treatment. Cassidy nodded and pointed to the backseat where a pile of bills and catalogs fanned out.

“There’s something from Aetna, and another from the hospital.”

“I bet the mailman thinks I’m sick,” Marie said, leaving the envelopes unopened. She diverted her attention back to the visor and pressed a button to light the mirror. “I rushed when I did my brows today. Do they look okay?”

Cassidy glanced away from ongoing traffic obediently, but her focus never actually landed on her mother’s brows.

“Your eyebrows look fine she said as she regained her spatial awareness, suddenly cognizant of the cars ahead slowing down.

“What’s going on up ahead?” she asked, hoping her mother had a better vantage point than she did.

“Oh, I don’t know. Why’s everyone stopping?”

As they pulled forward, Cassidy realized “Shit, it’s a checkpoint.”

“Ohhh yeah. I read they were going to be out more—the 4th of July coming up and all.”

“Fuck.”

“What? You don’t drink anymore.”
“No, ma, remember?—the car isn’t inspected.”

“I told your father.”

“He can’t do anything; it’s the check engine light,” Cassidy replied, and resigned herself to the unavoidable confrontation before her. When it was their turn, the officer caught their expired tags immediately.

“Officer, we were just on our way to chemo. We have a 4:00 appointment.” He looked over at Marie, adjusting her wig nervously—and back at Cassidy with a sigh.

“Is that right? Well I don’t want to make you late. Just pull alongside the road here and I’ll have you back out there in two minutes.”

Cassidy cursed a few more times when the officer was out of earshot and she was parked alongside a wide shoulder where the police loved to write tickets. The officer pulled up behind her, leaving a single patrol man to check both lanes of traffic, instantly slowing things down.

“Now, I would write you for something lesser, but you’re just going to get the same ticket again, so you might as well get it over with now. Get it inspected, and if it fails—at least you have ten days to fix it. You can go ahead and go—drive safe now.”

When the window was rolled back up and the engine was running again, Marie let out a loud “Son of a bitch.”

***
The waiting room was cheery and the receptionists always smiled and asked questions and spoke as though no one was near death at all. A woman in a wheelchair was looking over the lower section of the desk’s swinging wooden door.

“The beach was beautiful,” the doctor told the nurse before either of them noticed the waiting patient.

“Oh, hi Martha, how are you today?” the doctor greeted her warmly.

“Oh, I’ve been better. You haven’t seen me—I’m crawling; I can’t walk. But I drove myself here,” she said.

“Ha, yep- that sounds like you, Martha. We’ll get you in as soon as we can.”

Cassidy and Marie sat alongside the waiting room parade; most were putting on a show of health, with their lipstick and matching headdresses—primped to be seen by everyone else waiting on their own poison cure. The running noses of the cancer patients rivaled those of the junkies Cassidy had once known. Skin thin, nails frail and flaking off from their beds, immunity low—casual music filled space between coughs, and they waited.

The chemo wing was as cheerful as the nurses could make a row of curtained beds with overhanging IVs. There were collages of photos on the wall, cards of ‘Thanks’, glittering doodads hanging from ceiling corners and spinning atop the air vents, solar powered tchotchkes dancing on a low countertop, stacks of snacks to choose from, warmed blankets, and books of survivor reflections at the Nurse’s Station just a few steps away from each bed.

The pumping of the machines kept time in seconds; the long, hanging bags of poison liquid promised hours until the beep of a finished bag meant that the chemical drip was
complete. Toxic to the touch, the nurses were always sure to wear gloves when handling the medicines, for fear of their own health being compromised.

Cassidy’s mother was halfway through her first round of chemo for Stage 2 breast cancer.

“You have to tell her,” Cassidy said quietly as they waited for the doctor to flutter in for her 2-minute check-up with Marie.

“What do you mean? No I don’t.”

“You do. If you’re worried about it, you do; it’s obviously something you’re thinking about.”

“I just don’t want her to think differently of me.”

“Ma, that’s ridiculous. It’s not like it was 20 years ago.” Cassidy tried to reassure Marie, but her mother was still ashamed to tell the doctor that she was smoking and eating a cannabis-infused coconut oil to cope with the terrible headaches of chemotherapy.

The doctor looked young and was in her mid-thirties. She had advised Marie not to drink, in light of alarming liver enzyme levels. But Marie kept expressing concern to her family that her worrisome levels could be the result of the doped-up coconut oil.

After going through the barrage of the usual 10-second Q&A session, the doctor forced herself to look up and away from her iPad and make eye contact with both women to ask, “Can you think of anything else? Any concerns?”

To her mother’s immediate horror, Cassidy had no problem saying, “We have this Cannabis-infused coconut oil she’s been taking—the THC helps her headaches, but she’s worried it’s messing with her liver enzymes. But she doesn’t want to tell you that.”
“Hmm.” The doctor took a moment but didn’t look surprised at the admission. “No, that wouldn’t be doing anything to your liver.” She looked from Cassidy to her mother sitting in the chair; Marie’s face turned to a lighter shade of red and she quickly told an elaborate lie to make the situation more palatable.

“Well, my daughter lives in Vermont. And her landlord has breast cancer. And it’s legal there, and, well—she got me some. And it really has been helping.”

“Yep, that’s just fine. But still keep away from any alcohol,” the doctor reiterated her warning.

Of the cannabis use, the doctor had no negative or further comment—but the apophasis of a cure caught fire in the air.

“Such a shame. Such a shame about marijuana,” said Martha from behind a nearby curtain after the doctor was out of earshot and on to the next patient. Martha had listened to the forced admission in the next bed shamelessly; she wasn’t shy about monitoring anyone else’s business within earshot—it passed the time. Going to chemo alone was no fun, but when your cancers stretched for years and multiplied and metastasized—fighting like hell became a full-time job, and everyone else found themselves pulled back into their own lives; your dying was no longer an emergency for them if it took long enough.

Cassidy stepped away from her mother’s bed to look beyond the curtain to the source of the voice and with a laugh said, “Hi there.”

“Hi. Ya know, I’d take pot over all these pills any day,” Martha said. “Too bad we’re not sick in California or Colorado, right?” she joked, grinning out from her skull—her sunken skin stretching.
“Yeah. It’s not fair,” Cassidy agreed.

“You’re not worried about it being illegal?” Cassidy’s mother asked Martha, still a little shaken after having to admit her pot use to her doctor.

“Hell, no. I was a lawyer for 25 years. ‘That which is necessary is legal’ — I’m not trying to overturn the government. I’m just trying to find a little relief.”

“Right. But relief, aside—marijuana has been proven to cure certain types of cancer. If it had been studied for the last century, rather than a war waged against it, we’d have a whole bunch of CBD and THC-based treatments for cancer, and for lots of other diseases,” Cassidy said.

“Shhh, Cassidy, stop. It’s not right to talk about cures for cancer in a chemo suite. You’ll upset people.” Marie pleaded for Cassidy to embarrass her no more, as she was accustomed to denying all marijuana associations in public.

“Oh, now, come on—let the girl talk. Seems like we’ll learn something. I thought it was just good for the nausea and for chemotherapy.”

“Nope. It has the potential to do so much more.”

“Well isn’t that a kick in the pants?”

Later that night John asked, “What do you mean she didn’t say anything?”

“The doctor didn’t say anything against it. She just seemed to not want to offer an opinion,” Cassidy confirmed.
“Wow. I almost can’t believe that. Twenty years ago the standard answer would have been ‘Well, we have alternative treatments that work just as well—no need to bring pot into all this’.”

“Well, times are changing.”

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe they are.”

***

John was waiting with Marie at her next appointment while the women in the waiting room were getting acquainted or old acquaintances or something—there was chatter...

“You know, I know someone who had a mastectomy way back when this was all new territory. They used to get the radiation all wrong; the poor lady was over radiated and it killed her bone marrow so she’ll basically have 3 broken ribs for the rest of her life.”

A young woman stormed into the waiting area and demanded, “Is she in? I want to see her. I made an appointment to see her under another name. I know she has the time.”

“She asked that while your suit is pending, you please refrain from contacting this office again. She can’t see you,” the nurse replied to the vocally distraught woman.

“The doctor will see you now,” a different nurse said to John and Marie, while still observing the mess at reception, intent on not missing a word or sudden movement.

“Please leave,” the first nurse continued speaking to the young woman. But instead, she turned to the room and announced: “Herceptin killed my mother. She was fine, and then my doctor convinced her to be some guinea pig for a drug that isn’t even approved for post-
surgery yet. Don’t listen to her. Ask her to tell you the truth.” With that, the young woman left through a slammed door, a waitingroom of patients exchanging glances from the awkward cushions in her wake.

“Isn’t Herceptin the drug you’re on?” John asked Marie as they followed the second nurse through the awkward hallway to the exam room.

“You two can talk to the doctor with any concerns,” the nurse reassured them. “But that woman’s mother had other medical issues that were complicated—if that little thing in the waitingroom put you off. It’s all confidential, though, of course,” she added.

In the cameraless room with the computer still linked to the file of the last patient the doctor saw, John seized the opportunity to squirrel away about 20 pairs of size Large gloves in his wife’s purse; they were ideal for trimming.

The drive home was mostly quiet, apart from the hole in their muffler.

“I can’t believe the insurance premiums are so much,” Marie spoke up over the noise, looking down at the mail from that afternoon.

“I know,” he agreed. Cancer was expensive.

"I hear Maureen O’Malley is retiring from the power company. You know, if you had kept that job, you’d be retiring in a few years." Marie frequently reminded John of his failure to keep clean all those years ago, and the landside of a life it resulted in; all of their struggles could be traced back to his positive piss test—his ultimate failure.

The bills were piling up—pushed to the back of a table where they were ignored until the phone calls began. When Cassidy was young, the growroom in their unfinished basement
made enough extra money to keep the family afloat living month-to-month after her father lost his job at the power company before he could find more work. Calcifications of dead spiders hung on almost every inch of the ceiling, but no one cared enough to remove them. Pieces of 100-year-old drywall fell into the plants every time they opened the door, but it never made much of a difference. There were rumors that the house was used as a bootlegging center back in the 20’s. An old bricked-over entryway in the basement was sworn by the townspeople to lead to a bar a mile down the road; but the tunnels had been closed off for years.

A closed system would have been better, but they vented the air out through an old rusted vent that released into a backyard garden. It took 2-3 months to grow a cluster of plants from cut clones after rooting them, potting them, and putting them into flower. They hoped each plant would yield a pound, but the wrong conditions could sometimes leave them with only an ounce per plant for all of that effort and electricity. When the medical bills started coming, John set up another room with growlights and white walls, and started to grow five times more than his usual personal supply so that they could sell it and attempt to cover the unplanned expenses.
A knock at the door made her heart race; this was the anxiety of being a criminal—looking out windows at ominous strangers or figures or shadows, or searching the outline of passing cars for police lights. Paranoia—everyone was sinister, everywhere suspicious plots spun. Always peering out windows, drawing back blinds—she was cultivated with a nervous mentality. Now, it never stops.

Cassidy’s parents stood in the doorway. Her mother stepped into the room with a heavy sigh and dropped her reusable shopping bags on the floor. Her father touched a big dent in the doorframe, offering to fix it next time.

“Fucking traffic. Plus, when we pulled off the highway there was a homeless man standing by the stoplight with a sign asking for money. Your father opened his wallet so the guy came up to the window, but then your father realized he didn’t have any cash on him. It was horrible; we had to sit there for two whole minutes while he kept eyeing us. I hate that you live here. Can’t you find a safer place to live?”

Cassidy chose not to answer. Her mother was never happy when they had to drive to Cassidy’s new apartment in Poughkeepsie for drop-offs or pick-ups or pleasant visits—John, still with a revoked license.

Cassidy left the room and came back with a set of earrings her mother often borrowed from her. “Here—these go with your outfit today. Borrow them for a while again.”

“Really? You think so?” Her mother posed with the earrings for a moment in a nearby mirror before remembering their purpose there. She reached into one of the bags and pulled out two large tin coffee cans; she lifted a plastic lid and started to sift through one. “We only
got two pounds, but they smell good. And the next round of plants is doing well.” She handed her daughter the cans of newly dried buds.

“Let’s go for dinner. You look so skinny—you’re not supposed to be thinner than a rail,” said John, trying to deliver his concern lightly.

“Yeah, let’s go. But I have to make it to the 8pm Step Group at St. Luke’s,” Cassidy warned.

“Ohh, but that’s in no time at all. We’ll be lucky to even have appetizers by then.” Her mother pouted as Cassidy looked around the room to grab her jacket.

***

Justin—a regular usually good for about 2 ounces a month who dealt in dimes and nickels mostly was already parked in the corner of the lot. She pulled in where he stood up against his car taking the last drags of a cigarette before he threw it into a flowerbed. They did the dance—exchanged pleasantries and dropped their bones into the heated seats of his car. He slipped a roll of cash out of his jacket pocket.

“Smells dank. Same as last time?” he asked, and tried to hand her $360.

She moved the bag further away and didn’t take the money.

“Sorry, the price went up; they keep searching cars and trucks heading east—fuckin’ random k9 units at weigh stations. The usual shipments aren’t all coming through. It’s about to get really dry around here and others’ll be charging 500 for the same ounce in a few weeks—if you can even find an ounce in a few weeks.” None of that was true, but it was plausible. She wanted his extra forty dollars because she knew he’d give it up easily.
“Just charge more for this—they’ll pay it.”

He sucked air through his teeth in frustration, and moved his hand toward her to reach into his glove compartment. From a sachet he pulled a rolled up fifty and handed it to her, still tubed.

She smiled and asked, “Are you going in?” as she handed him a ten.

“Nah, fuck that,” he said. “I got errands to run, deliveries to make—people waiting.”

She stepped out of his car and watched him pull away.

Cassidy first met Justin about a year ago on a scouting mission for a new, discreet buyer. She had spotted him just as everyone was slowly going in to claim all the best seats. But the smokers lingered outside, and she asked him for a light—she always asked them for a light. It made them feel like knights: gentlemanly. She hated him for the kindness, as she had been trying to quit since her mother’s diagnosis, but all the best potential customers smoked cigarettes outside of the meetings—the ones still pissing away ten dollars a pack for cigarettes were the ones sitting with the heaviest thoughts, no shortage of sadnesses—they were the ones with the most time spent kicking dirt around in their self-made holes. Time is an alcoholic’s enemy more than any other part of the equation; programmed into you and weighted, it works against you—that’s in its very nature. Always counting, always tracking—Cassidy always had an equation in her head, trying to solve for something that continued to escape her.

“These meetings bum me out. I only come for my mother’s sake. Sit next to me?”

“Sure.” He was so eager—it was almost too easy, and it was hard for Cassidy not to be a little sad about it.
After the rituals began and about ten minutes passed, she poked her mark in the leg and shifted her eyes toward the door when she had his attention. Lifting his eyebrows, he nodded as she felt for her cigarettes; the pair was gone before the applause died and the newest speaker introduced himself. Everyone sat around wishing they had a second chance, not knowing whether they’d really be strong enough to do anything differently. The meeting rooms always spilled over with great conflations of realities.

They stood. "Hello, my name is Fred..." is all that could be heard before the door closed behind them and a uniform voice coughed against it.

Justin had introduced himself to the room a few minutes before; when the meeting leader asked about anniversaries, he proudly announced his 2 months clean and sober. She chose him because he was attractive, but not alluring—so she’d be able to keep her head on straight. He had tattoos up his arms, but nicer jewelry than she was wearing and expensive shoes. It’s not hard to spot a former drug dealer at an AA meeting—there’s a confidence about them. It’s more difficult deciding who’s still smart enough to want to be in the game. She knew their type—just as she knew her own type. She was pretty good at identifying the people who would be eager for trouble if it meant profit.

And that first night she had Justin’s full attention; new girls at meetings usually got their fair share of attention—especially with so many young men there simply because a judge ordered them to attend, and not because of any burning desire to reform their lives. If you weren’t sure where to get heroin before you went to AA, you’d sure find someone who could tell you where to get it inside a meeting. Some only went to meetings when they were out of money and ready to meet someone newly poised to fall from that saintly wagon.
"I hate cigarettes, but love to smoke," she said.

"Ha, well that's unfortunate."

"Not really... I don't smoke many cigarettes. There are other things to smoke." She smiled with half her mouth.

"Ha, word—I feel you. I used to burn, but had to stop when I got in trouble. I was selling and they got me with a fucking bitch informant who cut a deal for herself. I was getting piss tested for like a year, so I had to stop. And then I just never started again. Sometimes I'll take a hit—I just never have any."

She hoped for this.

"Smoking keeps me from drinking—I need something in my life to chill me the fuck out—but I have some bad genes so drinkin's no good. Besides, cigarettes'll kill ya." She smiled and flicked the butt. She didn’t want to be smiling—she wanted to be washing carcinogens off her hands. But if she smiled, he'd be on the hook.

"Hey..." she started slowly, taking great care to carry the weight of what she was about to suggest. "I probably shouldn't tell you this, but I have some really tasty stuff in my car. I always smoke after meetings. But, honestly, I don’t feel like waiting tonight." She sported another crooked half-smile. The invitation lingered for only a second before he accepted with eagerness; he threw his butt and it landed slightly further on the pavement from where hers had burned out. Many of the young guys at the meetings were there because they had orders to attend from the state or city or town that caught them—busted for drunk driving, possession, or both. Courts had turned meetings into a safe place for delinquents on probation to network and find harder drugs. A probation officer will track you down at a bar, or show up
at your home, but they never bothered to look too closely at you when you had a meeting scheduled for the day.

In the car she rolled the joint onto clear cellulose papers and knew to make eye contact with him as she lipped it closed. Plucking guys from meetings was never the hard part—figuring out how to convince them to buy a large amount of weed on a lark presented the difficulty; the trick was to spot the entrepreneurs. Luckily, there were banks adjacent to almost every church meeting place.

The transaction was going well by her standards. They both knew to follow the rules of parking lot smoking—get as low down in your seat as you can and always have an eye on your mirrors so no one can come up from behind you. The most bored of all the police specialize in the parked car swarm—you’d never see them coming.

Sometimes her prospects thought it was a date—she was grateful Justin didn’t seem to. Instead, he recognized a good score when he found one. It wasn’t as hard as one might’ve assumed to convince an actively, vocally sober person to buy a large amount of weed all at once—as long as it was the right person.

A sale was a sale—it was all the same layout, with the pitch slightly altered to fit each customer; the customers were predictable—she learned quickly how to identify the best of them—the ones ragged with discontent. The drops were easy to make once she found continuing buyers; she gave them the number of her burner cell and they’d text with the location of the meet—the AA Meeting Schedule implied the time. If the phone calls and texts started dying off from one steady buyer, she would go to new meetings to find new buyers.
They never knew who she really was, and she always maintained a professional distance from her buyers; she had finally learned caution after years of avoidable disasters.

The meetings were all the same; meetings in every city, every town—mostly in church basements, sometimes circles of folding chairs, sometimes rows. They were never welcome to meet upstairs in the pews. There was always coffee, always a basket asking for money, always smokers taking sad drags outside. Often she’d have to walk through an empty church to find the meeting; as she passed, the statues’ eyes molest her.

Sometimes she’d sit, stay, listen; she never told her story and didn’t attempt to chat up other members after—but if she felt like staying that day, she absorbed the highs, the lows, and tried her hand at reminiscing. She’d take breaks from sizing up a sale, sit solemnly, and listen until it was time to smile again. At each meeting they held hands and said the Lord’s Prayer. Cassidy never spoke the prayer anymore, but she used to—when it was all fresh. Though, usually she had to be going quickly—she was running late for her next meeting, or trying to make it to where she needed to be by closing time.
They’d tap dance around it all, going about their days—moving as they could, aching to be propelled forward.

“It’s time, dinner’s ready,” Cassidy said from the kitchen.

“I’m not sure I’m hungry.” Marie looked over at John, who was half-asleep on the couch. He jolted up and awake at the sound of knives in the next room.

“There’s a joint,” John said as he lifted it from the ashtray.

“Of course there is,” Cassidy said, entering with two plates and reaching for the joint in exchange.

“Your joint’s over by your cushion, dear,” John said to Marie.

“Thank you.” She sat down, stronger than in the previous months.

They sat around the table and no one said a word.

“You can’t take Wednesday off, right?” Marie asked John out of the silence.

“No, I can’t.”

“Okay. I’ll have Cassidy take me to my appointment with the cardiac specialist.”

“Specialist?”

“They want to run tests to make sure that my heart is standing up to all the medicines. My chest has been tight and the doctor wrote a referral for someone to check it. I told you last week. I guess you don’t remember.”
Cassidy inhaled another toke on the joint from her usual place at the table, situated between her parents at either end.

“But,” Marie continued, “did you know your daughter drives liked you—overreacting to every little thing, afraid of cars on the side of the road, always beeping her horn when she thinks someone’s too close or rolling too fast toward a stop sign? It gets tiring, always getting jerked around like that because you two are paranoid.”

John let the last of the joint burn out in a rock ashtray off to the side of the dinner table.

"Come on—that guy was gonna pull out. You wouldn't have beeped?” Cassidy rehashed the incident to which her mother was referring.

“No, and I certainly wouldn't have gone into the other lane like you did.”

“I just wanted to give him less of an opportunity to hit you,” Cassidy said, defending her defensive driving before changing the subject. “And, hey, Ma—I was in your room looking for my earrings before—where's your birdcage?” A thick patterned layer of dust marked the space it used to occupy at Marie’s bedside.

"I got rid of it.”

“Did something happen to the bird, Marie?” John coughed after he spoke up with sudden interest.

“I let him go,” she said as she piled mashed potatoes on her plate. Her hair was growing back in wispy patches—curlier than anyone expected, still short, and a haunting shade of white with occasional grey. Soon it would be a year since her diagnosis—soon she would get a scan that would either finalize her remission, or mandate more months of infusions.
"What? But you loved that bird." John was attempting to seem genuinely invested in the conversation in spite of his bloodshot eyes and distractions from a pile of slow-roasted ham on his plate.

“I wasn’t sure if he would go right away, or take his time. He sat for a while before I finally had to shoo him out.”

“Maybe it liked its cage,” John suggested.

“Yep. That was the problem. But it’s no use making something live its life caged up if we have a choice in the matter. I don’t know—this morning I woke up and it just seemed cruel.” Marie held her hand out over her plate and motioned for John to pass her the lighter, and he did. The meal continued on with only the hum of the television to support the silence.

“When will they announce, John?” Marie asked suddenly.

“Not today,” he answered almost immediately. Then he thought for a minute and said, “Soon, though,” without lifting his eyes from his plate, cutting his ham clumsily.

“It has to be soon,” Cassidy spoke up, as she stood to clear her plate and retreat to the livingroom.

“Is this still worth it?” Marie asked, as she blotted out her joint.

“I think it is. Especially now.” John was confident.

“I don’t suppose you’ll be able to drive me to my infusion in two weeks?” Marie asked.

“Cassidy can’t take you?”

“No, not this time.”
“Sure, dear. I’ll try to take a half-day. It’s a morning appointment?”

“Yep. Early—9am. And I can’t be late again.”

“Sure, 9am,” he agreed, smiling playfully.

“I mean it,” Marie said, already fed up.

“Come on... if we’re five minutes late, what are they going to do? Give away your bed? Not give you chemo?” John asked.

“It’s about respecting other people—caring enough to respect other people.”

A few words from the news caught John’s ear. “Wait, turn that up. What happened?”

In the livingroom, the television reported on an overpass explosion; the newscaster talked in circles saying nothing, and every minute or so reminded his evening audience that they were still waiting on an official statement. John didn’t speak; instead, he sat beside Cassidy on the couch and picked a bag up off the coffeetable. He placed a few buds on a small, square, ceramic plate, and crushed the weed with his fingertips in preparation for their next high.
Bibliography


<http://norml.org/marijuana>.


