



PETER J. CROWLEY

Readers Write

MARIJUANA

IN 1967, EVERYTHING I HAD HEARD about marijuana was negative. Then one of the young guys who worked for me started talking about his experiences with it. He was intelligent, fun to be around, and very good at his job. A small crack opened in my absolute certainty that all pot smokers were criminals and addicts.

Curious, I asked one of my younger friends to get me some marijuana. He sold me eight joints for a dollar each and gave me instructions on how to smoke them. I waited until my wife and daughter were visiting relatives for a couple of days. Then I locked the door, closed the drapes, threw my car keys on top of a kitchen cabinet (in case I went crazy and wanted to drive off a cliff), and lit a joint. I smoked the whole thing and sat down to await my new experience.

After half an hour with no results, I switched on the TV to amuse myself. I soon became engrossed in a program I had never seen before. The lighting, the music, the dialogue, the camera angles — everything about it was superb. I watched for probably fifteen minutes, fascinated, wondering what show this was. When the program suddenly ended, I discovered that I had been watching a commercial that had lasted all of thirty seconds.

Right away, I wanted to apply this newfound attention to every aspect of experience. The furniture, the walls, the backs of my hands, the cat — nothing was too ordinary or mundane to revisit with heightened understanding. I felt as if my mind were a window that had been dirty for years but now was washed clean.

Owen Russell
Lexington, Kentucky

MY HUSBAND AND I HAD TWO LITTLE ones, and money was tight. We used cloth diapers, ate homegrown veggies, and wore secondhand clothing. We were frugal in every way, except for one: my husband liked to smoke pot.

To save money, I planted some pot seedlings in our vegetable garden. They did unbelievably well, and my husband had a newfound interest in gardening that year.

At the end of the summer, I read in the local newspaper about someone who had been arrested for growing pot. I could see another such headline: “Mother Of Two Jailed For Growing Marijuana.” That night, after we put the kids to bed, my husband and I went out and cut down the plants by the light of the full moon.

Over time, alcohol got the best of my husband, who is now my ex. Perhaps I should have grown more.

Name Withheld

I’M A SHY PERSON, BUT AT PARTIES IN graduate school I learned that marijuana would release the “real me,” shaking and shimmying in perfect time to the beat of Aretha Franklin’s “Respect.”

Years later, my best friend had a radical mastectomy at age thirty-four and used marijuana to alleviate the side effects of chemotherapy. Many nights she and I sat in silence on her screened porch, savoring the evening sounds and

slowly smoking a joint. The parties were fun, but those are the times I miss the most: the creak of a rickety porch swing, the still night air, the hooting of a distant owl — all of it heightened by the possibility that it could be the last time.

Norma Calway-Fagen
Nashville, Tennessee

IT’S A FRIDAY AFTERNOON, AND I’M chopping vegetables at the kitchen counter when my fifteen-year-old daughter puts in a CD and says, “Come on, Mama. Let’s dance.”

I tell her I have to make dinner, but she won’t give up. I go with her to the living room.

“Teach me to dance like you and Daddy do.”

I start to explain the concept of leading and following, and we end up giggling like kids. At one point, she flings her arms around my neck and says, “Oh, Mommy, you’re wonderful!”

I know, without a doubt, that this

READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they’re the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn’t as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we’re unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don’t want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

Feel free to submit your work under “Name Withheld” if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author’s name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don’t question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you’ve already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We’re sorry, but we can’t respond to or return your work, so don’t send your only copy unless you don’t want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you’ll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Laughter	June 1	November 2003
Idealism	July 1	December 2003
Turning Thirty	August 1	January 2004
Small Towns	September 1	February 2004
Deception	October 1	March 2004
Out Of Reach	November 1	April 2004

moment would not have happened if I hadn't had a few tokes earlier in the day.

More than anything else I've ever tried — and I've tried everything: reading, talking, agonizing, parenting classes, therapy — pot helps me to be a better mother. It puts me in touch with myself and with the moment. It sharpens my focus so that I really *see* my kids, instead of just looking at them. It allows me to enter their world and become interested in whatever fascinates them.

"It brings me back to myself," I tell my best friend, Liz, on a long walk in the country. I've just flung my arm around her shoulder and given her a squeeze. I allow myself this spontaneous gesture of physical affection only because I'm a little high.

Pot frees me. It's as if my very molecules are more open: to possibility, to insight, to feeling.

"You know what it is?" I tell Liz. "It's like I'm in prison, and pot is the key to the door."

"There must be another way," Liz says.

There must be, I agree. But I haven't found it yet.

Name Withheld

IN THE EIGHTIES, FOUR FRIENDS AND I rented a large, run-down house in Eugene, Oregon. The men, myself included, were useless at household repairs, but Carolina could fix or build anything. She even built a privacy fence around the backyard, where we sunbathed nude all summer.

The following spring, Carolina plowed up the backyard and put in a vegetable garden: to save money on the communal food bill, she said. To save on our communal pot bill, she planted four marijuana plants.

Oregon was the first state to decriminalize marijuana possession: you could be fined twenty dollars for any amount under an ounce. But you could still get up to five years for cultivation. As our plants grew alongside the vegetables, I worried about getting busted.

To ease my mind, Carolina set up a ten-foot-square piece of plywood between the marijuana and the vegetables.

Casual visitors couldn't see our felonious plants, and they still got plenty of sunlight. But Carolina didn't like the look of the bare plywood, so she painted an idyllic scene on it: a farm on a green hill, with white fences and clouds, trees, and a rainbow. In the middle of it all, she wrote:

Bless this garden
As we bless each other —
Like the harvest kiss
Of Gaea Mother.

One Saturday, Carolina's golden retriever got into a fight with our neighbor Paula's dog, who had dug a hole under the fence and crawled into our backyard. Carolina had compassion for all the world's creatures — except for Paula and her slobbering Rottweiler, Max. Carolina chased Max back out the hole under the fence and called the police.

By the time the policeman arrived, Carolina and Paula were in a screaming match in the front yard. Paula stormed off, and the officer asked to see where Max had dug his way in. As Carolina and I led him into the backyard, I suddenly remembered our pot plants.

The policeman eyed the garden and said, "My wife would be green with envy if she saw your vegetables. She couldn't grow a cactus in Arizona."

I willed him to get back in his cruiser and leave, but Carolina began proudly pointing out different plants.

"What inspired you to make that sign?" the officer asked.

A few marijuana leaves dangled over the top of the painted plywood. We were screwed.

"My aunt always built a little altar in her garden," Carolina said, as calm as could be. "I just wanted something to appease the food gods." They both laughed. "Would you like some tomatoes or zucchini?" she asked.

"Nah," the officer said. "Your neighbor would claim it was a bribe. Anyway, I need to go and write this report."

We escorted him to the front door and watched him drive away. As we walked back through the house, Carolina said, "David, if you were any more nervous, I would have had to put a diaper

on you. He was just a cop."

"Sorry," I said, "but I can't talk casually to a cop while he stands fifteen feet away from our pot plants."

Carolina's eyes grew large.

We harvested the marijuana — leaves, buds, and all — that night.

*David Wood
Bowling Green, Florida*

I TEACH IN A TINY PUBLIC SCHOOL IN a picturesque town in California wine country, where the cultivation and sale of marijuana are a major part of the local economy. The pot industry employs a significant portion of our town's small undocumented-immigrant population. My undocumented students tend to consider the idea of getting an education so they can find work in the "real world" a joke. Many are already out in the real world making thousands of dollars selling marijuana. Besides, because they're illegals, their only alternative is picking grapes in hundred-degree heat for a mere fraction of what they currently make.

Meanwhile, every weekend my husband and several of our friends — all comfortable, decent, middle-class folks — smoke marijuana recreationally. Though I don't smoke marijuana, I do drink wine — made from grapes picked in hundred-degree heat by the struggling parents of my drug-dealing students.

Name Withheld

I WAS TEN YEARS OLD THE FIRST TIME I smoked pot with my mom. We were in upstate New York for my grandmother's funeral, and a group of us took a walk through the woods. My beautiful, rebellious, crazy mom smoked with the older kids while I tagged along, trying desperately to keep up. Then, finally, it happened: I, the awkward youngest child, the chubby one with the fogged glasses who wanted so badly to be a part of her mother's beautiful insanity, was passed the joint.

At twelve, I couldn't multiply, but I could roll a fat spliff. I didn't like school. I didn't like conformity. I didn't like boundaries. I liked buying drugs and trying new drugs and stealing drugs and pretending that I was older than twelve.

I thought I liked the fact that my mom was always stoned. I thought I liked getting new pipes and big bags of weed in my stocking at Christmas. When I was sixteen and my mom moved out of the house, I thought I liked the freedom. I was wrong.

I am now thirty-three with two children of my own. I still smoke on occasion. It is a comfort to me: soft, warm, familiar, and sad. I do not share it with my daughters. I send them to private school and nurture their innocence. When my daughter turned ten, I taught her how to bake bread, and we shared her first perfect loaf together. I was so proud — of both of us. Then I tucked her into bed, kissed her sweet face, and went to the garden to smoke a joint and cry, mourning my own lost innocence.

*Eli A.
Oakland, California*

I SMOKE MARIJUANA PRETTY MUCH every day. My husband smokes, too, and most evenings find us out on the back porch, having a toke. We don't quite fit the government's image of drug users: we're both educated professionals who work hard, pay taxes, have raised good kids, and participate in the community. But when evening comes, we turn to cannabis to give us some perspective on the day.

It's the renewed vision the drug grants me that keeps me coming back. There's no physical addiction. After twenty-plus years of use, the worst I feel when I stop for a few weeks is mildly irritable. But when I smoke again after a short abstinence, I see a holier universe. Cannabis heightens my connection to the world. Practicality is dethroned, and joy is given room to grow. My thoughts are less linear, more global. I am intense, creative, and focused in a wholly new way.

My only regret is having to keep my cannabis use a secret from all but my best friends. I miss the seventies, when joints were passed around at parties and strangers would stop you in the street to offer a toke. Pot was a currency of togetherness then. Now we are threatened with drug tests, task forces, harsher sentences, and infringement of our civil liberties. These days we smoke

alone instead of with friends; that's the real crime.

Name Withheld

MY EIGHTY-SEVEN-YEAR-OLD MOTHER was, and is, an all-time classic party girl. She comes from the "time to take your medicine" school of highball drinking: always at 5 P.M., not a minute before.

When my son went to college, my mother would kid him about his pot habit. (She guessed what was going on.) The next Christmas, he presented her with a tiny blue-and-white Chinese urn containing two tightly saran-wrapped joints. "You said if you ever smoked this stuff, Grandma, it'd have to be the very best," my son told her. "Well, here it is."

My mother beamed, thanked him, and said she'd save it for her deathbed.

She didn't, though. The following October, she and I arranged a beach trip to get away from it all — and to smoke one of those joints.

Sitting on the motel bed with her legs out, favoring her recently replaced knee and rubbing her arthritic fingers, my mother kept saying, "I don't know what the fuss is all about. I don't feel a thing."

Then my aching, forever put-out mother, prone to depression and endless bouts of romanticism — not to mention jealousy and anger that life didn't turn out the way she'd thought it would — got up and danced around her cane. Why in the world, she asked, had she never heard of Ramsey Lewis, whose music billowed out of the boom box? "A true genius." Then she laughed until the tears ran. "If I had known pot could make you laugh this hard," she said, falling back on the bed, "I would've started smoking it a lot sooner. Lord, if my friends could see me now!"

Just before I pan-fried some scallops, my mother suggested, "We need a little more of that stuff." I told her I didn't have a roach clip, and she stood up and walked steadily into the bathroom, sans cane, healed as surely as if she'd been dunked into the Euphrates. She came back with a triumphant smile and a hair clip, ready for another round.

"You know," she said, never one to be outdone, "I think your father tried some

of this reefer back when he was a young man in New York." The smoke curled up over her horn-rimmed glasses.

My mother is still saving the other joint for her deathbed. But I've told a few family members about our beach trip, and every one of them is dying to smoke with Grandma.

Name Withheld

(end of excerpt)