

2nd Place & Top Northlander (2023): Michael Botur, Weedling

The cops've brought a battering ram this time cause Dad nailed timber on the back of the door and it only takes a couple of thuds before you see fingers of light poke through the cracks and the shouting begins.

Sunlight spears your chest. You stand shocked but not surprised. Happened when you were three, then eight, and now you're eleven, and if ninjas with semi-automatic guns toss you out and you have to go live with another uncle or stepmum cause Dad's been naughty again, it's no biggie.

As the ninjas tear open the house and light invades, you grab your treasures, cram them in a PAK'nSAVE bag. Mostly just Pokémon cards. There's a long-forgotten Nerf gun in a palm tree in the hall with roots and creepers growing over it, abandoned cause you never had anyone else to play Nerf Wars with you, and you tug the yellow plastic pistol free of roots and in the tangle comes a tiny plant with two sad, ant-sized fluffy little leaves, sprouting out of a discarded smoke with green herbs in it Dad's friend mashed out. Too many seeds, Dad's friend reckoned.

So long as the next person you're dumped with has weeds growing in their basement under the 24/7 lights it won't be that bad. Need that normalness. A new treehouse-hut-home. Like *Jumanji*. That movie's choice. Epic journey; the boy finds his old man in the end. Or becomes him. Same diff.

Ninjas tear the plywood off the windows, letting light in as they search the dusky house. You shove your gold foil Bulbasaur card in one pants pocket and the sprouting herby cigarette in the other, crumbs and all. The ninjas surge past you like a king tide, washing through the rooms, poking their guns into corners and calling Dad's court name.

Outside, you sit on the top step like it's a bus stop. Child Protection aunty comes and kneels. Ain't that bad. You get presents and new pyjamas when you move. Doesn't matter if your journey takes you somewhere stink. It's actually more annoying when people make you think there's hope.

A soft aunty with big Samoan boobs and a flower-dress pushes a box of Lego into your arm and folds your finger round a cup of hot chocolate.

'Weedy little thing, aren't you? You ever get out of here much?'

Riverhead Forest, you want to explain. Used to play with your Tonka dumptruck scooping up pine needles while Dad dealt with men on motorbikes. There was a hole in the forest floor. Dad and his mates would snigger as you cleared the pine needles with your toy truck, then when you uncovered the rope handle they'd lift the wooden lid off the ground. Steps down into the hole, a small ladder. Lights down there, pipes, beakers, metal drums, boiler suits.

A yell behind you. Wrestling. Dad's friend who guards the weeds is battling the ninja-scrum. He fights them wearing only tattoos. Meat, they call him. Sorta like an uncle. Closest dude to Dad. He's put in a van with letters on the side saying Armed Offenders Squad.

A scream down in the basement where you're not allowed, the basement that stinks of veggies. They've got Dad, or one of his traps has got one of the ninjas. It'll mean jail for Dad again, probly.

'Can you guys, like, adopt me or whatever?' you ask the Aunty.

She buys you a Happy Meal. Soon you stop asking.

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Place is like Hogwarts. Half-school, half-fortress, a castle four storeys tall tucked behind hedges so the neighbours don't have to see unwanted kids.

Try to think of it as home, they tell you. Them bars on the windows? Means you're safe here, son.

Two old married brown people come out onto the driveway. Their grinning eyes scrunch and crumple like accordions. Hildie and Edward. Don't worry, kiddo. We've had hundreds of boys just like you.

Hildie and Edward promise to wash your clothes. Fabric softener to coax the rotten vegetable stink out.

They give you your own room with a stationery pack and exercise books on the little desk. Newspaper under this pot plant. Headline: Dealer convicted over cannabis operation.

The plant's a Jumanji jungly guy with big spaces in the leaves. Enough dirt in the pot to dig a small hole and tuck in your seed from that mouldy old stinky herb-smoke. Pour on some water. It'll put down roots and grow and be like all the other plants so long as no one moves it.

The bedspread has no burn holes in it and no Bob Marley face. Doesn't feel safe. You sleep in the corner between the mattress and the wall, clutching a butter knife. Watching the door in case ninjas burst in.

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You see Dad in the paper two times. Ugly photo, all alone in a wood box. Then never again.

You start Mt Roskill Grammar. Immediately look for the naughty boys so you don't set yourself up with hope or expectation or any of that disappointing stuff. Get your head shaved so there's nothing for kids to rip out in fights. Don't carry lunch so there's nothing that can be stolen from you. Trade Pokémon cards on break time with the other smokers.

You hang onto Bulbasaur, though. Bulbasaur is the plant with power. Just needs water and a little attention and he'll grow up strong enough to beat anyone.

You and your boys stand around at break time, toeing the dandelions in the cracks of the concrete. The Bloods jump you in, each of them punching you in the head in the toilets. After that you're officially in the crew. Weedling is your sign, your tag, your gang name. At break time, when your crew's not swapping Pikachu for Jigglypuff cards, you deal ciggies and joints. Pills from Hildie's medicine cabinet.

School's okay, at the bottom. No big expectations on you; no harsh light burning your leaves. Maths is okay, learning how to translate ounces to grams to milligrams, but what you really sit up for is science—bio, specially botany. Science is, like, the only stable thing. Oil, acid, emulsion, molecular bonds. Learning how weeds are no less valuable than other flora. Just freer, chancier, hungrier to live.

History is the only other good subject, even the boring settler history that makes your Bloods snore with their jerseys over their heads.

You stick around after class. Ms Chimamanda puts scabies cream on your knuckles. She's, like, Christian and she wants to save you or whatever. Insists on helping you understand where you've come from. Traces your Dad's court name back to old shipping manifests from the 1870s. She sees you – what's that word – objectily? Talks about your ancestors' journey from England, the shipping company ripping them off. "Inherited poverty," apparently.

A little bit each day, five minutes between periods, she finds the right websites, books, dusty sepia photos. Seems your people – the scum of Sheffield – were dumped on these shores. They've set their expectations low ever since. Not exactly slaves. More like paving.

Men brewing chemicals to pass the time. Make life less serious. To wash out migration companies' lies, promises that New Zealand was a chance to plant roots, to grow anew. Took 'em generations to understand they were weeds. Perfectly good organism, just planted in the wrong place so the weed grows up crooked.

So starting out as unskilled shovellers, skimmers, sealers, fingernail-splitting gum digging, they took up moonshining on the side. Manufactured every naughty thing that came along. Your dad got into it at 14 and his dad got into it at 14 and his dad, all the way back. Grog then wacky baccy. Poppies, next, then coke in the 70s, speed in the 80s. Happy pills in the 90s. Meth last Monday.

All of this, in the essay Ms Chimamanda encourages you to write and enter in that competition, and you win, cause it's raw and fresh. Refuse to go on stage for the principal's handshake, though. You just laugh about it with your Bloods at breaktime. Surprised the judges thought your essay was "confrontational" and "bold" and "honest," lol. Everything in the essay's just your normal daily deal.

S'all good, you tell Ms Chimamanda, throwing your bag over your shoulder.

Walking out. This journey takes you to the parking lot, where there's growling.

School ain't the right soil. Gonna do an apprenticeship.

'Hang on, whoa whoa whoa, hold up,' she's saying. 'Wesley - this is way too abrupt, too sudden?'

'Not really, miss. It was always in the post, know what I'm sayin'? But cheers for, like, helping me ... what's that thing the counsellor's always sayin'? Adjust my expectations.'

Meat is waiting on his Harley in the parking lot. Picking you up gently, for now.

Later he'll brush the pine needles aside, force the seed down in the hole, underground.