

PALO ALTO ODYSSEY

Teen stops taking his Ritalin

MIRANDA thought about Toby, a teenage boy in Palo Alto she knew who had been arguing with his parents about whether he should continue to take his “smart drugs” or not.

According to her friend Valerie, the boy’s grandmother, the family argument had gotten heated.

Toby didn’t like the way the smart drugs made him feel. He said they left him feeling disconnected from people. On the other hand, he had better grades in school when he took the drugs; so his father wanted him to continue doing so.

Rebelliously, Toby had stopped taking his Ritalin. When he had done that, his grades declined. Without the smart drug, he did not compete as well in school.

Said Toby’s father Carl, “You must continue to take this medication. It is the way you will succeed in the world.

This is part 17 of a 24-part fictionalized serial appearing in the Daily Post, written by John Angell Grant with illustrations by Steve Curl.

You are fortunate to have a pharmaceutical boost that helps you to be a success. I wish I had such a tool when I was a child.”



CARL

Carl had been the CEO of a startup that had not succeeded. Living in the high-rolling Silicon Valley tech world, Carl had come more and more to feel that he had failed in his

own life. He was determined that his son would make up for that.

Toby was depressed by the conflict with his father. Miranda could sympathize with the boy. She reflected on

the pressures that children were under to succeed in Palo Alto. This was not the way things were when she was a child.

She could see a child saying to himself, “I’ll never be Steve Jobs; I’ll never be a star athlete; I’ll never be famous; my parents and everyone in Palo Alto will be disappointed in me. So what’s the point? I might as well give up this crazy Palo Alto life, and go live on a tropical island somewhere, fish for my food, and crew out on a sailboat. There’s nothing more for me here in Palo Alto. To my father, I am a failure.”

Miranda recalled a news story she’d recently read about university students in Europe who were complaining that the American students abroad in those schools were taking “smart drugs,” putting at a disadvantage the local students who did not take smart drugs.

“Those smart drugs are just speed,” Miranda reflected.

She thought about her own days in college taking speed. It was fun. You studied better. But the long-term effects weren’t good. Including the suicide of one of her roommates who became addicted.

She remembered pulling all-nighters before exams, or when papers were due, with the help of Benzedrine or Dexedrine. They worked, she thought.

Miranda reflected that the pharmaceutical companies had now pushed new forms of these drugs down towards the smaller children, to help them focus and compete in elementary school, middle school and high school, creating a nation of addicts.

Miranda felt sad, thinking of the time she had spent growing up in Palo Alto in the 1950s and 1960s; and how childhood now was no longer permitted in her hometown.

More on Monday.