

Al Capone Does My Shirts
by Gennifer Choldenko

Friday, January 4, 1935

Today I moved to a twelve-acre rock covered with cement, topped the bird turd and surrounded by water. Alcatraz sits smack in the middle of the bay- so close to the city of San Francisco, I can hear them call the score on a baseball game on Marina Green. Okay, not that close. But still.

I'm not the only kid who lives here. There's my sister, Natalie, except she doesn't count. And there are twenty-three other kids who live on the island because their dads work as guards or cooks or doctors or electricians for the prison like my dad does. Plus there are a ton of murderers, rapists, hit men, con men, stickup men, embezzlers, connivers, burglars, kidnapers and maybe even an innocent man or two, though I doubt it.

The convicts we have are the kind other prisons don't want. I never knew prisons could be picky, but I guess they can. You get to Alcatraz by being the worst of the worst. Unless you're me. I came here because my mother said I had to.

I want to be here like I want poison oak. But apparently nobody cares, because now I'm Moose Flanagan, Alcatraz Island Boy- all so my sister can go the Esther P. Marinoff School, where kids have macaroni salad in their hair and wear their clothes inside out and there isn't a chalkboard or a book in sight. Not that I've ever been to the Esther P. Marinoff. But all of Natalie's schools are like this.

I peek out the front window of our new apartment and look up to see a little glass room lit bright in the dark night. This is the dock guard tower, a popcorn stand on stilts where somebody's dad sits with enough firepower to blow us all to smithereens. The only guns on the island are high in the towers or the catwalks, because one flick of a wrist and a gun carried by a guard is a gun carried by a criminal.

Besides the guard tower, there's water all around, black and shiny like tar. A full moon cuts a white path across the bay while the wind blows, making something creak and a buoy clang in the distance.

So, I'm a little jumpy. But anybody would be. Even the silence here is strange. It's quiet like something you can't hear is happening.

I think about telling my best friend, Pete, about this place. "It's the Devil's Island...*doo, doo, doo.*" Pete would say in a deep spooky voice like they do on the radio. "Devil's Island...*doo, doo, doo,*" I whisper just like Pete. But without him it doesn't seem funny. Not funny at all.

Okay, that's it. I'm sleeping with my clothes on. Who wants to face a convicted felon in your pajamas?