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from *Yellow Rose*

To tell an accurate story, it's important not to overdramatize. But when you're driving through the desert at sunset, toward a town nestled at the base of a mountain, looking for a healer who will explain the uses of a potent herb, and the name of the town is Truth or Consequences, you might be forgiven for thinking that you'd stepped into a Hollywood Western/New Age dream sequence.

My Uncle Richard drove us in his white minivan from Albuquerque to Las Cruces by way of T-or-C, which is local pronunciation for the town originally called Hot Springs. His passengers were my mother, her boyfriend David, and me. We were taking Mom home to Las Cruces after surgery. She was weak, and there were hints of the digestive emergencies to come, but on that day she appeared to be mending.

While Mom had prepared for the debulking in Albuquerque, I scrambled through websites in Boston, downloading forms and applications from the New Mexico Department of Health for a medical marijuana license. In states where medical marijuana has been legalized (and many, I presume, where it hasn't) cancer patients use it cope with nausea and bone pain. Some said it was the only thing that helped.

And so, on our way back to Las Cruces, despite Mom's desire to be at home in her own bed, we stopped to see Dr. Mary Bolton in T-or-C. If our paperwork was in order and she agreed that Mom's diagnosis fell within the state's list of approved conditions, she would be our prescribing physician. Not all doctors will. The surgeon-oncologist in Albuquerque treated the question as though we were asking him about the efficacy of magic crystals, so I quietly

checked him off the list. I led the charge for a marijuana license because I was convinced that the nausea from chemo would be intolerable and that the FDA-approved medicines for mitigating those side effects would fail.

In my research I went to the staid sources first— the American Cancer Society and National Cancer Institute— which kept the topic politely at arms length. There was gathering interest out there, some serious research, and a lot of incomprehensible babble. My search lead me to a few individuals who, while not exactly disreputable, seemed willing to grant as much healing power to moonstones as marijuana. I also found kind and knowledgeable people at cannabis dispensaries who described the different strains and their effects. Mom didn't want to get high and they assured me that low-THC strains were reliably “non-recreational.” With no briskness of tone, they explained how each strain was best taken: as a cigarette, a vapor, hard candy or tincture in a cup of tea.

My research uncovered something else that propelled me— a motivating fear, far more distinct than my fear that she would die. I knew she was going to die. What I hadn't realized until then was how deeply afraid I was that she would suffer.

David and Richard were both moderate Republicans who had spent their careers in government work and the military, and found this errand at the end of a long day onto an unpaved road to obtain drugs—even legal ones—suspect. They were granting me leeway, but I felt the limits of their patience. It was getting dark, Mom was beyond exhaustion, and all I had were directions scribbled on a notepad.

We arrived at Dr. Mary's just before sunset. In front of us rose Turtleback Mountain, just as Dr. Mary had described. Richard and David stepped out of the van scanning the perimeter

like sentries, their demeanor calm, but watchful. We helped Mom from the van and she, too, looked around cautiously. I could see she was holding herself gingerly between trust in Richard and David, and her own leanings toward alternative medicine. “Braids” was no rebel, but she had shuffled a few Tarot decks in her time.

When we rang Dr. Mary’s bell, we heard dogs barking and I began to worry that we might be intimidating: four strangers, arriving at dusk. What would the dogs think of us? I felt the strangeness of our errand myself, but I didn’t let on. The sentries were accepting my leadership on faith and I needed to display confidence, or this would simply be wasted hours off the highway.

Dr. Mary smiled as she answered the door and welcomed us inside. She was a small woman, wearing a Russian trappers style hat that seemed markedly out of place indoors, in the desert. Once we got past the entry way and the two friendly dogs, I saw that the house was larger than it appeared from the road. On the other side of the living room were sliding glass doors that faced Turtleback Mountain. The room was decorated with bright pillows and fabrics, bundles of incense, candles and Buddha statues—every sign that the alternative dwelt here in hippie mellowness. Her dogs wanted to sit on our laps, but she held them back and they sat, instead, at our feet. David and Richard stood, as though unsure who or what might need guarding, until Dr. Mary invited them to sit in wicker chairs in front of the glass patio doors.

I leaned forward, acting as spokesperson, while Mom shrank into the couch, still bundled in her coat and gripping her briefcase. She looked like a child about to be left at summer camp. Gently, I took the briefcase so I could show Dr. Mary our application and Mom’s medical history.

Dr. Mary explained carefully, smiling gently all the time, how cannabis was used to calm nausea, improve appetite and relieve pain. It's remarkable, she said, that there remains so much resistance and skepticism about marijuana, yet here we have an herb that has been used for centuries with all sorts of benefits we don't even fully understand, and just one side effect: euphoria.

I did not look at Richard or David when she said "euphoria" but if I had I expect I would have seen eyebrows raised. I didn't care. We were a world away from the surgeon-oncologist who barely broke stride on his way from my mother to the next operating table and I felt certain that if I could take this in—not just the marijuana but the living room, the sunset and the town—I could give it to Mom in comforting doses.

Midway through our visit, Dr. Mary excused herself from the room. When she returned she was no longer wearing her hat and we saw that she was bald.

"This is what I really look like," she told us. "I'm a 19-year cancer survivor. This is my third recurrence."

The hat was a piece of stage business, a pause to let us get our bearings. She sent us home to Las Cruces with a signed application for a license, which we later used to buy twelve cigarettes from a dispensary in Santa Fe. Mom never smoked them. They sat in a tightly closed jar, growing stale until we found them two years later, while cleaning out her apartment.