

TEN

Next to our house sat a little park with a view of one of Val Vista's manmade lakes. Because we Phoenicians live in a vast, dry desert, we go crazy for bodies of water of any kind. What was once a 900-acre irrigated cotton field had been artfully transformed into a master-planned community nestled among a series of 10 little finger lakes. Our community was dotted with lush parks, gardens, and ballfields kept green with water recycled over and over from the lakes.

As I took groceries out of my car one day, I noticed a man about my age sitting in his electric wheelchair looking out over the water next to my home. He caught my eye and called me over to sit on the park bench next to him. I'd seen him driving his wheelchair around our subdivision, so I knew he was no stranger.

"Hey, I'm your neighbor, John. I live at the end of your street." We shook hands, and I told him my name. "Say, I've been hearing the sirens and noticing the paramedics have come to your house several times during the last few weeks. I hope you don't mind my asking what's going on." He pointed to his wheelchair. "As you can see, I'm no stranger to illness and injury."

"No, I don't mind telling you at all," I said, grateful to talk to someone who understood. "My 16-year-old son, Ben, started having

seizures a few months ago. Grand mal seizures. He had a terrible accident last year.”

John shook his head. “I heard all about his accident in front of the Walgreens. My daughter Cheyanne was near there when it happened—told me all about it. It shook her up good to see your boy lying in the street like that.”

Something about John made me trust him. He had a kind face and intense blue eyes like Mel’s. Many people in the neighborhood and even at church had no idea what to say to me about Ben and the turn our lives had taken. Members of our church had come to the hospital and prayed over Ben. I never listened to the prayers, thinking of them as private between God and the person who was praying. But I knew those church members asked God to heal my son, and God seemed unwilling to do that. Now here was a man, a neighbor, who’d been through a life-altering event himself. It felt so good to talk to someone who wasn’t wondering if my family’s tragedy was a punishment from God.

“May I ask why you use a wheelchair?”

“I broke two vertebrae in my neck in a car accident. I’m in pain pretty much all the time. But I manage. I get by, with a few tricks I’ve picked up.” He laughed shyly.

Tricks? There are tricks for pain? “Do you mind telling me what you do to handle your pain? Sometimes Ben’s meds don’t even begin to touch the kind of pain he has. But I think his nausea is the worst thing. His seizure medications are brutal on his stomach.”

John looked at me for a long time, seeming to make up his mind about something. Then he leaned forward and said the words I am

convinced saved Ben's life: "I find that marijuana reduces my pain. It helps me relax and makes me want to eat again. It also settles nausea."

"Marijuana makes you want to eat?" This idea intrigued me greatly. Ben had grown painfully skinny. I finally bought him a new belt because his old one had so much left over after the new holes he'd punched in it. Sometimes, he went six or seven days without eating anything at all.

"People who are undergoing chemo take it, and they say it helps with nausea and lack of appetite. They have a synthetic marijuana called Marinol, but it doesn't work as well as the actual plant, and doesn't get into the blood stream as quickly. I've read up on marijuana, and it seems a lot of people are using it to help with what ails them."

"Only problem is—it's illegal. How do you get around that?" John chuckled. "That's certainly the problem. I have a nephew who gets it for me. I don't ask him for details. Would you like Ben to try it and see if it helps?"

I staved off Hope. I valued my status as a law-abiding citizen. And Mel valued his high-profile career in law. I scrunched up my face and squinted at John. "Do you know who my husband is?"

"Sure, I do. Everyone knows Mel McDonald. He was President Reagan's pick for the United States Attorney. He was a prosecutor and a judge, as I recall."

"That's right. He's kind of an Arizona legend," I said, always ready to brag about my husband. "He still holds a record in Arizona."

"Yeah? What for?"

“He was the youngest Superior Court Judge ever elected—he was only 32. He served with Sandra Day O’Connor.” I stopped before I tooted Mel’s horn too loudly. “My husband sure is something. But, John, here’s the thing. Mel was also in charge of the Arizona Drug Task Force during the Reagan administration. This is Arizona, one of the biggest conduits of drugs smuggled into the country from Mexico. Those cartels get drugs into the United States through the tunnels they dig. Or they catapult it over the border fences or over the Rio Grande, or hide it in truck tires, and in barrels and crates of produce brought in from Mexico. Can you imagine what Mel would say if I told him what you just suggested?”

John put up his hand in a gesture of surrender. “Hey, now. I’m not trying to corrupt Mel McDonald’s wife or son. I was just offering what works for me—and for other people. It’s a natural herb that’s been used for thousands of years. No one thought much about it before Nixon declared his War on Drugs almost 50 years ago.”

I shook my head sadly. “I’m sorry if I sound ungrateful, John. I know you’re trying to help. I just can’t put my husband’s job at risk on the off chance that marijuana might help Ben.”

“I predict,” John solemnly said, “that Americans will someday get over their fear of marijuana, so they can see its medicinal value. It’s classified as a Schedule 1 drug right now—right along with cocaine, ecstasy, LSD, and heroin. Schedule 1 drugs are considered habit-forming and not at all medically beneficial. But that’s just plain wrong where marijuana is concerned. Marijuana does have medicinal benefits. Study after study shows it.”

“I haven’t heard of those studies. If it’s so effective, why don’t people know marijuana has medicinal value?”

“I believe that might be because of the pharmaceutical companies and the way they lobby Congress. Can you imagine the money Big Pharma would lose if people could ingest a natural herb to handle pain and nausea and all sorts of ills? They can’t patent an herb.” John shook his head.

I could see how angry this situation made him. I thought about all the other things I knew weren’t right because of politics and money. “But it works so well that you’re willing to break the law to get it, right?”

“That’s about it. Americans have been spooked by the drug wars, Cindy. My kids and your kids all grew up saying, ‘Just say no to drugs.’ Oh, I agree kids shouldn’t be smoking it, getting high, and taking risks in cars and such. It’s a medicine, as far as I’m concerned. I certainly wouldn’t want Cheyanne or Eric using it just for fun. But if either of them was suffering like Ben, I wouldn’t hesitate to get it for them.”

“If only it were a simple choice, I would let him try it.” I looked toward my car, trying to remember if I’d bought ice cream and, if I had, whether it would still be in a solid form. “Thanks for your offer, John. I accept your kindness even though I can’t accept your suggestion.” Wearily, I got up from the park bench and waved goodbye to my new friend.

“I’ll see you around the neighborhood, Cindy.” John fired up his electric wheelchair and turned it toward his home. “And, hey, I live at the end of your street—in the house with the red door and the rose

garden in the front. I'm always out fiddlin' with my flowers. Come see me if you change your mind."

I called the paramedics two more times in the next two weeks. I started buying Ben smaller T-shirts and pants, so he wouldn't look like he was swimming in his clothing. Finally, I knocked on John's door. I felt stupid and desperate and hopeful all at the same time. I asked John to come to my house while Mel was in court and show Ben how to roll a joint.

Yes, that bitch Hope was back.