

## What We See When We See Each Other

By Catherine Klatzker

I've worked to unravel it, but it's still a mystery to me how we move through pain and time, how they weave into each other and transport us through nerve endings and sensory memory to long forgotten episodes of heart stopping fright and dread.

The quick back-story on my recent hideous knee injury is that after the urgent care and the x-rays and the ER and the ultrasound and finally seeing my own primary doctor and getting an orthopedic referral; and after cortisone injections and prednisone and going to a second orthopedist because I didn't like the first, and more cortisone and prednisone; and going to my acupuncture doctor in between; and finally getting an MRI that confirmed I wasn't a *wuss* as the pain got worse and worse and nothing helped—after all that—I decided to find out about medical marijuana, legal in California.

I did my homework, got a doctor's order from a pot doctor and drove down Lincoln Boulevard to a co-op dispensary with the green cross in the window in Westchester, not far from LAX, and I told myself it was a field trip as I parked and hung my disabled placard.

I wanted to peek in the doorway and get a sense of the place as I approached, but all I could see was a glassed-in cashier's window, reminding me of the times I used to park at the donut shop in North Hollywood and walk past the check-cashing business with its bullet-proof windows and lines of day-laborers. A hulk of a guard in black leather glared at me as I moved toward the marijuana dispensary. He scared me. The bulge at his right hip could have been his phone or some kind of weapon.

I felt betrayed by my naiveté, that this simple scene intimidated me, frightened parts of me, and I walked right past the shop. Then I turned around and re-approached it from the opposite direction. I clutched my cane in my left hand as much for moral as physical support and I breezed past the muscled security guard—a hobbled breeze—and entered my first marijuana shop.

Music filtered into my awareness. Was that MTV on the flat screen at the end of the reception area to my left? Was MTV still around? Of course there were no products on display; it wasn't a supermarket. A scruffy forty-ish man welcomed me from behind his window.

I greeted him and admitted, "I don't know quite how this works." I shoved my doctor's letter at the cage. "How do I know if you have what I need?"

He smiled.

"I really don't know what I'm doing," I confessed.

It's been a slow realization over the last few months, since my sixty-eighth birthday actually, that others see an elderly woman when they look at me. They think I'm old. I haven't actually adjusted to that, or figured out how to use it to any advantage. I don't feel old.

So I imagined he saw this old woman in a pot shop stumbling for words because it was all so different from scoring some weed or hash in the sixties, and he was slightly amused and kind of bored, too.

“Here’s how it works,” he said. “Once you’re signed up here, you just show this letter and your ID every time you come in, and you can go into the showroom where a budtender will help you select what you need and purchase it. Just fill out this page for us and we’ll get started.”

*Budtender.*

As we spoke, a stream of college-aged kids were showing their ID’s and passing into the room behind the locked door off the reception area.

The longer I stood, even with my new cane, the greater my pain grew. I sat down to fill out his informed consent. When I entered the showroom I found a large bright room with long glass display case-looking counters. It seemed that each case contained dozens of samples of different strains of pot, all around the room. Edible marijuana-infused candy was on counter-top display, as in a candy store. There were at least four budtenders helping customers. By this time, I wasn’t looking around much because of my pain. I went straight to the first available person to find what I needed. She was lovely, in her twenties, long brunette hair, could have been an actress—probably was, given that we were in LA.

“I’ve been told I need something that’s high CBD, no THC, non-psychoactive, because I need this entirely for pain and I don’t want the THC side-effects. I need to be alert,” I told her. “Do you have something like this?”

“Yes! We have a few choices for you,” she responded. She was very happy.

Medical marijuana is a cash-only business. I have been told it’s a cash-only business for complicated reasons having to do with licensing and federal restrictions. In any case, they have a convenient ATM machine in the showroom.

Chills and cold sweats from the prolonged pain of being on my leg too long were upon me by the time I purchased my small bottle of high CBD tincture.

I *am* grateful for this non-psychoactive medication that allows me to keep working, thinking clearly and writing. It may also keep me off long-term prednisone until I have some healing, and while I still must stay off my leg as much as possible to prevent more injury, the pain is much, much less.

An old man was entering the dispensary as I was leaving. He looked *really* old: the lines in his face, the stoop of his body, everything. He looked haggard too, maybe in pain. I stood straighter, taller. I needed my cane desperately and I wondered about what we see when we see each other, if I looked the same to him, like a really old woman as I made my way out of the dispensary, past the no-longer frightening security guard, to my car and home.

Later, I knew there was more to it when I emailed my primary doctor about all that had happened since her first referral to Dr. Smith, the orthopedic surgeon I hadn’t liked. She wrote back saying,

“Thank you for all your updates in your knee saga. It sounds like your second orthopedist is at least responsive.”

I realized I hadn’t told her what happened with Dr. Smith. I understood that I could. She’d been my primary doctor for many years and the prescribing doctor for my pre-existing PTSD for six years, which we never discuss. I answered her by emailing,

"Responsive means a lot, all other things being equal. FYI: the off-label anti-seizure medication I take for civilian PTSD, to keep flashbacks away, is effective, but I still risk traumatic flashback if a dentist is too rough and detached, for instance, or if a doctor is impersonal and aloof with me, rather than engaged and informative. That risk was triggered with Dr. Smith. So there's that."

I pressed send.

I never speak of those things, I just don't. I never mention how those "Dr. Smith moments" can potentially plunge me into the body of a four year-old having painful things done to me by someone I trust.

I discuss non-physical pain and betrayal with my therapist only, not with my regular doctor. Disclosing even this much to her, I felt naked, more naked than being seen as old and clueless. Maybe I should have just let my reasons for choosing the second orthopedic doctor go unsaid. I wondered if I was supposed to be this open. *Do normal humans reveal this much?* I wondered why flashbacks still felt demeaning, intuiting the helplessness they imposed on me. What *do* we see when we see each other? This was potentially humiliating.

Then my primary doctor emailed her answer: the single letter "L".

I had to look it up to know that she was sending love.

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**Catherine Klatzker's writing has appeared in *Emry's Journal*, *Tiferet Journal*, *Lime Hawk Journal*, and are forthcoming in mental health anthologies from In Fact Books and Lime Hawk Literary Arts Collective. She was a Ragdale Foundation writing resident and won Tiferet Journal's 2014 first prize in nonfiction. Klatzker is a recently retired pediatric ICU RN, and she has coordinated mindfulness retreats for ten years for professional health caregivers coping with death. Read more about her work at [catherine.klatzker.com](http://catherine.klatzker.com)**

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