



HEALERS OF THE WHITE MOUNTAINS

WRITTEN BY: HANNAH WALDORF

Honeysuckles are my favorite. What I love most is their taste. With a pinch and a pull, the flower will give a single drop of its impossibly sweet nectar without fail.

They are both fragrant and familiar – their flowers and buds have been used for thousands of years for their medicinal properties. My mother, her mother, and the women before them all knew their secrets. For a simple cold, flu, or respiratory infection, you might brew the blossoms into a tea, syrup, or tincture, or gargle the infusion. For rashes, boils, or sores, a salve could soothe the skin. Their applications span digestive issues, fevers, headaches, detoxification, and countless other ailments.

That knowledge drew visitors from far and wide to the women in my family, seeking their wisdom of the land, the body, and the soul. In a time when viral and bacterial outbreaks rose and fell like the sun – flus, fevers, coughs – people turned to us when clinics overflowed, or the government issued yet another emergency order. Each season arrived at us more unpredictable, more unsteady, than the last.

While my mother welcomed patients into our small kitchen, I would often slip away, climbing the slopes behind our home tucked deep in the backcountry of the White Mountains. The land was alive: soil teeming with worms, beetles, and ants; forests humming with

whispering winds; gorges carved deep; and rocky peaks that cut the sky.

When I was among the ridgelines, I always felt that the world made sense. That the mountains recognized me. Maybe because they had raised me as much as my mother had. The land had shaped me – patient and watchful.

Today, my mountains were quiet, as they often were on winter mornings. I lay curled beneath my wool blankets, sunlight spilling through the window and the scent of warmth, herbs, and wood smoke rising through the floorboards. Frost clung to my window's glass, framing a white, desolate expanse of the snowscape. Through the untouched snow below, I noticed a flash of deep blue moving toward the house. It bobbed and lurched, and as it neared, I could make out a man with his beanie pulled low, stumbling with urgency. A knot of unease tightened deep within my stomach.

Then came a knock: frantic, low, insistent.

I heard my mother's voice at the front door, hushed but firm, met by the man's trembling reply. I pressed my ear to my bedroom door, straining to catch every word. Their conversation sank into urgent murmurs, then silence. The hinges groaned as my mother pushed my bedroom door open, catching me mid-eavesdrop.

Her feet were steady on the wood, the posture of a woman who had carried decades of weight yet refused to bend beneath it. The man stayed close to the front door, his hat clutched tightly in his hands. His eyes darted around the room before landing on me.



"Julie," my mother said, "come make us some tea."

I nodded and moved to the kitchen, where I filled the kettle. My hands worked automatically; I had made this tea countless times. But my chest tightened with the familiar fear. The kind that came whenever someone arrived with news of another outbreak. Another strain. Another unknown.

My gaze drifted across jars of dried herbs – lemon balm, passionflower, valerian, chamomile. Remedies for anxiety, panic, and fear. I steadied my breath.

Behind me, my mother guided the man to the kitchen table.

"Sit," she said. "Tell me what has happened."

He perched on the edge of the chair, shoulders taut. "It started with Mr. Wayerson from the county's market."

My mother's brow furrowed. "How is he now?"

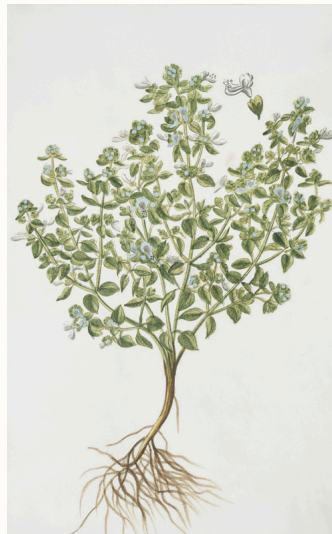
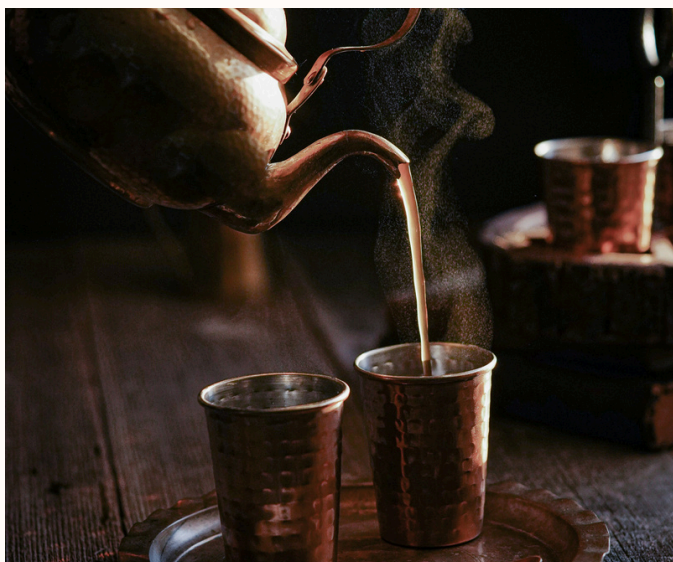
"Dead," the man whispered. "Perfectly healthy a few days ago."

My mother closed her eyes briefly. "Poor Mrs. Wayerson," she murmured.

"She's gone too," he said. "And their boy. Only fifteen. A few kids from his class. Their parents. Whatever this is, it's moving fast."

My throat tightened. I set the teacups down quietly, but neither of them looked up.

"And what are people saying?" my mother asked.



"There's talk," he said, lowering his voice. "Some say it's another lab accident. Others say population control. Or profit, maybe a pharmaceutical trial gone wrong."

My jaw tensed. Every outbreak came with theories, shadows, and suspicion. Fear made people cling to anything. Yet something in his voice told me this time felt different.

"And what's your favorite theory?" my mother asked.

He hesitated. "The Bureau of Resources and Management leased out portions of the mountains and land across other regions, too."

"For what purpose?" my mother asked.

"No one knows entirely. The clearing down the road looks like it is for lumber, and the land near Wister Road for livestock farming."

"Up here?" my mother said sharply. "In this climate?"

He nodded. "They claim it's part of the Restoration Initiative. That every pandemic of the last century has been a reminder that we need to expand. Build more. Produce more. Make sure our people are taken care of."

His voice dropped. "But the animals are moving. Bears and deer are coming into town. Out west, bobcats in suburbs. Coyotes in city parks. And they're dropping dead. Folks say whatever's killing them is killing us."

My mother glanced at me. Her eyes seemed to say listen closely. I always did.

"Do the doctors know?" she asked. "The hospitals? The government?"

"They say everything is contained," he replied. "Just like every other wave. But people are scared." He swallowed hard. "Do you think this is natural?"

My mother didn't speak at first. She stared into her tea, watching the herbs swirl like drifting leaves.

"We've lived through pandemics for generations. But each time, we rebuild our cities, our farms, our factories, as if these sicknesses are just an inconvenience, not a warning."

The fire crackled softly behind us.

Her voice softened. "We disturb the land. We move the animals. And when nature responds, we call it a mystery."

The man lowered his head.

"So what do we do?" he whispered.

"We start by remembering what we chose to forget," I interject.

I looked out the window. Snow drifted slowly and softly, the world hushed beneath its blanket. The mountains stood proudly in the silence, as if bracing for what was to come. Both my mother's and the man's eyes were on me now.

"How," I say, "have we still not learned?"

The words left my mouth steadier than I felt, but something in me shifted. A small, defiant spark flickered in my chest.



AUTHOR BIO

Hannah is a graduate student at the Bren School, specializing in environmental policy and communication.

Originally from Los Angeles, she spent three years in New York City working in law before returning to California, where she is now happily based. She is deeply passionate about using creativity and storytelling to help others connect with the natural world.

