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Thinking Ahead

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“Question two: are you feeling down, depressed, or hopeless?”

For the last six months, I’ve taken these questionnaires enough times that you’d think I’d be able to plan my answers out ahead of time. Yet sitting here, I take all sorts of mental notes, hunched over, while my sour hot coffee breath ricochets off from my mask and into my nose, thinking: *Have I been feeling down? Depressed or hopeless?*

“Nearly every day,” I answer.

“So, what are you studying? You said you’re in college, right?” She asks me later after the questionnaire. This, like the questionnaires, I’ve considered routine during these appointments. I’ve lied to other doctors, even my primary one. It’s easier to tell people I’m still going to become an English teacher; there’s less judgment that way. Somehow, pursuing a career in education seems more respectable. But this doctor sees me. I notice her hand, the way it maternally comforts my thigh, and when she speaks to me, she doesn’t sound clinical. This time, I convince myself it will be different.

“I’m an English major with a minor in creative writing,” I say.

She stares into my eyes blankly as if she were in a daze. She doesn’t say anything at first, and it feels like we’ve sat there for hours trying to paint portraits of each other, trying to hone in on specific details like exactly how many eyelashes we have or how many obvious pores on our skin. *Crap, I’ve made a mistake.* I avert my gaze, breaking our eye contact. She waits to speak until I look at her again.

“You’re a writer,” she says, finally. She wears a mask too, but I can tell that she’s smiling because her eyes arch with delight; they look like little umbrellas on her face.

“Yes,” I say, recognizing that this is the first time I’ve called myself a writer, out loud, to a stranger—much less a doctor. “I am.”

“Wow,” she whispers. She shuffles the papers attached to her clipboard before setting the ensemble down onto the table behind her. “Writers are powerful. They’re also one of the hardest things to be.” She puts her hand on my shoulder softly and assures me, “That’s great, Jocelyn.”

I’m speechless. This doctor, who has likely spent an agonizing amount of time and money to get to where she is, who saves lives on a regular basis, is sitting here telling me that I’m powerful? She has my life in her hands—she placed it on the table beside her earlier—yet, what piques her interest is that I’m a writer? There is no response I could ever write to express the way I’m feeling.

I settle for this: “Thank you.” It’s all I can say. Again, I see the little umbrellas. I obsessively replay this encounter in my mind: *I have to remember this.*

“How long would you say you’ve suffered with your mental health?” she asks me towards the end of my appointment.

Oh, easy. “Since I was fourteen, but I didn’t do anything about it until about last December.”

She looks at me for a long time. I long to see the umbrellas, but I don’t this time.

“Six years? I’m just so happy you’re starting to feel better,” she says, but I feel her pity in my sinuses.

Now, I’m sitting in my car, the one carpeted with the paper bags from various fast food restaurants and the stench of sour milk from a latte I’ve yet to discard. I wipe away tears with a used napkin, trying to avoid the dried up blobs of ketchup. *Are you proud of yourself?* I jot down details of the visit on my phone. I smile into the blue-tinted screen, creating a ramp for my salty soldiers to follow in the process, inspiration sizzling in the back of my mind. *To be a writer is to use yourself as just another source for content.* It’s upsetting to me how much I miss out on; my existence, according to my brain, is a database and there’s no room for “living in the moment,” as they say. There is only the craft. And as much as I bargain with myself, *Just live, silly girl, live!* Those moments aren’t for me.

I title the page, “To Be Used In A Future Piece.”