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Lonely

DON'T YOU EVER GET LONELY?" HE ASKS ME. I LOOK AT him from across the table. My eyes give away my surprise at his question. I wonder from where it came, and for how long he has wanted to ask it. I don't know how to answer him.

My shoulders stiffen. How is one supposed to answer such a question? Isn't loneliness universal? Don't those desperate pangs define our very humanness? I want to avoid the question, change the subject, get up and walk away, anything but answer him. But I always do that when I start to feel uncomfortable around him. He hates that about me. So I am trapped.

My lips tighten. I want to tell him he is being rude. I want to call him out for his impropriety. I want to ask him if he even knows me.

His eyes catch mine. They are genuinely curious, and patiently awaiting my response. I breathe in. My loyal friend of such tumultuous years. These have been years in which my brain's comfort with the humanities has suffered the consequences of my heart's desire to become a healer. They have been years of redefining myself, as both a scientist and a woman alone. He is not trying to hurt me, only to understand me.

I let my eyes fall. My fingers caress the side of my coffee mug. No one has ever asked me this question. I am scared of its nakedness, but I long to give him the response I know he deserves. I clasp the mug with both hands, the heat soothes them. I let out my breath and swallow.

When I must tell a patient she is dying, I think, and I watch her grown sons struggle to contain the tears, the sobs, that are choking them to utter breathlessness; when I then have to wonder why I signed up to become this kind of news-conveyor;

when I am tired, so tired I could collapse, and there is no one else to take care of me, but me;

when close friend after close friend marries, and I start to question if I am easily replaceable;

when I remember the way he threw his head back when he laughed, the way my hand felt wrapped in his, the way his sweater smelled when I placed my face against his shoulder, and I ache with reminiscence of what it was like when I still trusted my best friend, when nothing hurt;

when I look at pictures of me as a little girl, my new front teeth strong-arming their way into the world, those invincible green eyes, and a smile so big it could cross a nation; when I remember that wonderment, innocence, and freedom, and I long to wrap my arms around her, and protect her from what is to come;

when I've carefully tucked all my patients into bed, ordered their morning labs, glanced over their vital signs, re-

viewed their medications, ensured their stability, and retreated to the call room, and I realize, after all the years since he left, I still don't have anyone at home to call and whisper "good night," no one who sees I'm not there;

when I must open my hands, and let those dreams of what might have been slip away;

when I want to say to the little girl that was me: you're going to have to hold on tight my love, it's going to hurt more than anything you have ever imagined, there will be days you won't remember, hours you are certain your heart is hemorrhaging somewhere deep within you, moments you are sure you will not survive;

when I long to be swept away;

when I yearn to be fully known again, despite the walls I instinctively build;

when I'll settle for a kiss;

when old friends open their homes to me, and I behold their world of marriage and children: finger painting, lunch boxes, scraped knees, mortgages, shared beds, family dinners, sleepless nights, overwhelming empathy, amazing love, agonizing worry, daily compromise, and breathtaking sacrifice; when my ache for this world becomes so all-consuming I have to shut the door behind me;

when I remember, so long ago, he promised me this world, and then left without telling me why;

when I return to my world: chest compressions, massive blood loss, airway disasters, insistent pagers, beeps, alarms, drains, tubes, catheters, lines, wires, long hours, and the ever-present battle against death; when I grasp just how different my world looks from the one I desire, and I have to ask myself if it is still one I can call my own;

when I realize becoming a healer sometimes means fighting a battle that cannot be won, letting go of far more than I could ever have envisioned, and ignoring the parts of myself that need healing most of all;

and when I recognize that becoming a healer also means emerging stronger, more determined, and more capable of love than I have ever known myself to be, arising more patient, gentle, compassionate . . . better, because of the grief I have witnessed, the sadness I have suffered, and the winter I have endured.

I circle the rim of the mug with my fingertip, take a long sip, and wonder how much to tell.

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