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Wrong

by Robin Reinach

Dr. Irwin Grossman—wasn't that the stupidest name? The psychiatrist looked stupid, too. I wanted to throw darts at his bulbous nose beneath his black-framed glasses. It was 1970 and I was 14, a savvy New York teen. Following Dr. Grossman into his office, I loathed his pointy brown shoes. The old-fashioned wooden desk he led me to was another turn-off. Sitting behind it, he looked like the principal from Archie Comics.

Not that I was the queen of first impressions in my rumpled Lenox School skirt. The gray tweed—hemmed to bare my pale, plump thighs—hiked up as I sat down. Across the desk from Dr. Grossman, my thighs spread on the seat. Embarrassment flushed my face, but bravado tossed

my head, bouncing my frizzy red hair. I saw Dr. Grossman's fleshy hands fold on his desktop. His furry eyebrows and thick glasses formed a Groucho mask; his doughy lips gave a smile that was too much to bear.

I glanced away from the therapist and looked around his room at the bookshelves and dirty Venetian blinds. The psychiatrist's casual ugliness disturbed me, and the rest of his office provided no relief. The toys scattered on Grossman's gray carpet made me cringe with shame. What pathetic kid had tossed that ragged teddy bear into a corner? Who'd played with the battered dollhouse and the little figurines? Eyeing a battalion of miniature soldiers, clutching their tiny guns, I recalled the creepy kid



Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall



who'd exited before me—a skinny middle-school boy with buck teeth. Talk about uncool!

During the session, I did my best to avoid Grossman's face as well as his questions. On my way out, I passed his next patient, a pimply blond who weighed about a thousand pounds. How had I ended up sandwiched between these two weirdos?

Exiting onto Madison Avenue, I cursed my parents for insisting I see Grossman. Therapy wasn't a punishment exactly, but it had been the consequence of admitting I smoked pot. Of course, I could have lied when Dad asked me. But I'd read *Steal This Book* by Abbie Hoffman, and I'd watched people eat blotter acid and trip out in Central Park. Pot was nothing compared with LSD; was it my fault my parents had flipped out?

Pulling out my bus pass, heading for the 70th Street stop, I wondered what was the matter with Grossman. Of course, I was no beauty with my freckles, frizz, and flab, but I knew enough to steer clear of orthopedic-looking shoes. In Grossman's place, I'd have avoided the Groucho glasses. I almost felt sorry for him, lacking any sense of how to present himself.

Grossman probably never looked in the mirror, I thought, because he didn't seem self-conscious at all. This last idea very nearly made me jealous. For me, mirror-gazing had become an obsession. As a teenager, I was desperate to be conventionally attractive, and improving appearances was a preoccupation that I assumed any intelligent person shared. Except, of course, for the naturally good-looking, a category from which both the psychiatrist and I were clearly disqualified.

Over our next few sessions, I found Dr. Grossman grosser and grosser. I could barely sit across the desk from him, averting my eyes from his bloated face. There was no way a person who looked like him could understand a thing about me. But I had to do something during those 45-minute

sessions, so I made a game of resistance.

"I wrote a poem," I announced one day.

From across his desk the psychiatrist replied, "I'd like to see it."

"I only show my poems to people I like."

How clever I felt compared to Grossman when he made no reply. I wasn't pretty but at least I was smart. And I knew how to insulate myself from the stolid psychiatrist with an attitude both merciless and smug.

When he asked, "What did you do in school today?" I gave an exaggerated sigh. "What about the weekend?" he tried again. "Did you do anything special?"

"Yep," I answered, flicking my long, red hair.

"Like?" he prompted when I didn't continue.

"Like..." I pretended to consider, then shrugged. "Something."

"Something," he repeated, deadpan.

"Yeah, and I went somewhere." It came out in a chuckle. "With someone!"

Session after session, month after month, Dr. Grossman tolerated my mocking, and I thought he was a nerd. The psychiatrist didn't object when I brought friends to his office, chewed bubble gum, or giggled uncontrollably. He let me snack on potato chips, crackling the plastic bag, littering his floor with crumbs. Once I brought an ice cream cone and licked it elaborately. Cigarettes, however, he banned.

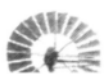
"My parents let me smoke, so why do you care?"

"Why don't you tell me how you feel when you can't have a cigarette?" he asked when we'd been meeting about a year.

"Because that's dumb." I twisted a lock of hair around my finger, refusing to look at his face.

"Why do you think you started smoking?"

Despite my policy of never giving Grossman any satisfaction, I warmed to telling him the anecdote that I guessed would bother him in an



entertaining way. "I smoked my first cigarette at the foot of Mom's bed."

"Really?"

"Yup." I smiled. "Mom and Dad smoke three packs a day—each," I added, shooting a look at Grossman. "When I was little, Mom always said to tell her if I ever started smoking, instead of hiding it, you know?"

Behind his glasses, the therapist's eyes were attentive.

"Mom said she wouldn't punish me because it would be too hypocritical."

His head inclined, not exactly in agreement, I thought, but wanting me to go on.

"So I figured there'd be no problem when I needed smoking permission for a teen tour. But Mom said no way. She wouldn't give me permission to start smoking," my voice went shrill, "far away from home with a bunch of teenagers." I dropped back to my normal tone. "She said it would be different if I were already a smoker." So, I leaned back in my chair and crossed my legs in their Lenox School skirt, "I called her bluff!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I took a Kent from the pack on her bed." This was my favorite part of the story, and I let out a laugh.

Enjoying the look on Grossman's face, I explained how Mom had watched me smoke that first cigarette. Chortling, I told him how I now shared my parents' Kents, stacked in cartons in our den closet. Then I took out my Zippo lighter, flicked open the silver cap, and struck the flint wheel until a flame leapt up.

"You like risk," he offered, what I considered a lame interpretation, as I ran my finger through the flame.

"I don't think we're getting anywhere." I shut the Zippo with a click.

Grossman's face was sad but earnest. After a long moment, he said, "I have to agree."

"I want you to tell my parents that therapy's not working." For once I looked him straight in the face. Steeling myself against his saggy cheeks, I continued, making sure to sound confident and grown-up. "It doesn't make sense, my coming here, week after week."

The doctor's eyes regarded me steadily through the lenses of his black glasses. "All right," he said at last.

Surprise and gratitude flared up in my chest. "Thank you," I breathed.

"I'll tell them there's nothing more we can do *for now*," he emphasized. "I'll tell them therapy doesn't make sense for you *at this time*." Dr. Irwin Grossman spoke with obvious regret.

Grossman's gray eyes were washed-out and tired, but they held my gaze. What kind of mother names their kid Irwin, I wondered, as something like sympathy stirred in my chest. Behind his thick glasses, the psychiatrist's eyes held defeat, but they didn't shy away from me. For a moment, I almost liked him.

But liking Dr. Grossman was a risk I didn't intend to take. My eyes dropped to his scarred wooden desktop, although my face still felt his stare. Contact between us was broken, but I sensed a residue. It was a bit like touching a spider web, feeling the filmy threads cling to my skin after I'd brushed them off.

Yes, there was something contagious about Dr. Grossman, something exactly wrong. When the psychiatrist and I connected, too much awkwardness and disgust moved into focus. Even at 14, I knew it was safer—and more fun—to stand outside those dangerous feelings and laugh at the therapist who personified them.

