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Silences

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Smaller

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Smaller

Here I am, once again, crying unnoticed in a clinical exam room.

These episodes over the past few months: whenever I sit in one place too long, in one of the cramped rows of threadbare fold-down chairs in the dim lecture hall, or hunched before the bluish glare of my laptop screen, something starts clawing at my insides, my ears ring, darkness closes in around the edges of my vision. I jolt awake in the middle of the night, my heart hammering, my throat constricting. I can't swallow, I can't breathe.

Something is wrong, and I am scared.

I explain it again and again to the general practitioner at the student health clinic, the words tumbling out and filling me with dread that I am summoning the symptoms to occur right here and now. He performs maneuvers, orders procedures and lab tests, his mounting impatience and skepticism palpable as each comes back within normal range. He has pegged me as just another hypochondriacal medical student self-diagnosing after her latest lecture.

But I'm not studying medicine. Something is *wrong*, and I am scared.

The fear bubbles over into these hot, unbidden tears, along with frustration, dissolving into defeat. Why can't I find the words to make him listen, to make him hear me? To make him see me.

What he sees is an overweight woman in her 20s, who has apparently been putting in a lot of effort to remedy that. Losing 50 pounds in 10 weeks? His eyebrows raise in approval. "*You are doing all the right things to get healthier,*" he says.

Through the tears, I can't summon the voice to ask, "*If this is me getting healthier, why do I feel like I am dying?*" Constantly exhausted, chilled to the bone, anxiety coursing through my veins and spiraling through my brain. Struggling to make it through another excruciating day, bereft of the respite of sleep at night.

"Just keep doing what you are doing," is his benediction.

What I am doing: I am starving myself, obsessing over every calorie I consume. I'm up before dawn for a grueling hour-long workout every morning, returning to the gym for another hour every night – longer when I can push through the fatigue.

All to make myself smaller.

And it is working.

As I sob quietly in the frigid clinic, I have never felt smaller.