

The Appointment

Selena stepped nervously into the silent waiting room, looking about, unsure of what to expect. She didn't want to be here, knowing in her heart that it was totally unnecessary. She was in good health, performed well at her job, lived in a comfortable apartment, had enough money in the bank, and most importantly, she didn't make trouble. Why did she need an evaluation, she asked herself, when there were so many others out there who were more deserving? Unfortunately, the yellow notice had arrived in her mail and her mother had advised her not to question it. When they wanted you to go, you went. Otherwise, you were just asking for trouble.

The waiting area of the building had been painted an antiseptic green, with no pictures or decorations of any kind. There were rows of molded plastic chairs arranged in regimented columns facing the office door. Overhead, the ceiling was lit with a series of fading fluorescent light bulbs, two of which were flickering on and off. With no windows to help illuminate the room, the conditions for reading were poor, which was just as well, as there seemed to be no magazines or newspapers available to read. The only other piece of furniture in the room was a large wooden desk off to the right, where a grandmother-like receptionist sat quietly. Selena noticed how the papers were arranged so orderly and clean on the receptionist's desk. They were just as methodically organized as the placement of the chairs. No doubt this was a reflection of the woman and the attitude she radiated. Other than the woman, Selena was the only other person in the room.

"Excuse me," she addressed the receptionist nervously, uncertain of the routine. "I believe I have an appointment with the doctor today. I was told to come here at..."

The receptionist glanced up at her and a smile broke wide across her face. She responded to Selena before she had a chance to finish her introduction.

"Ah, yes...you must be Selena Roberts. Yes, we've been expecting you. So good of you to come, and so prompt..." she beamed proudly at Selena. The woman's gentle demeanor seemed to relax Selena, making her forget temporarily about her upcoming appointment. If that was the job of a good receptionist, then she did it well, the consummate professional.

"Does the doctor want me to go in right away?" she asked timidly.

"Oh, he'll be calling you in soon enough. Please, have a seat, dear. I know that they're not the most comfortable chairs available, but we make do with what we can. Bureaucracy being what it is these days I'm afraid we haven't much of a budget. But then I'm sure you must read about these things, don't you?"

"Well, actually...I don't read very much. Or watch the screen, either."

“Oh, I suppose it’s just as well. There’s so much bad news out there today, so much strife and unhappiness. Who wants to hear about such things? I’m sure a pretty young thing such as you would have more important matters to think about, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I guess so...”

“Of course, of course...Well, do sit down. I’m sure the doctor will come for you shortly. He’s really a very conscientious fellow. He never likes to keep people waiting.”

Despite the woman’s words of assurance, the doctor did in fact keep her waiting for what seemed like an hour. An hour during which Selena had nothing to occupy herself, other than her own dread. That and avoiding the over-friendly stare of the receptionist. Every so often, the woman at the desk would lean over and offer a polite smile, or even try to engage her in conversation. Selena would just nod politely and saw just enough to discourage any further banter. She wasn’t feeling very friendly today.

With that thought, the intercom buzzed. The receptionist picked up the oversized handle and listened attentively to the receiver. She nodded in response to a voice that Selena could not hear. Turning to face her, the woman gave her the response she had expected.

“You can go right in now, my dear. The doctor is ready to see you. And don’t be nervous. I’m sure you’ll do just fine.”

Selena shook her head glumly and tossed a strand of mouse brown hair back into place. There was no point any longer in putting this off any longer. She pushed ahead past the large steel door and entered the doctor’s inner sanctum.

Once past the waiting room, she entered the narrow hallway done in cheap wood paneling. At the end of the hall stood a door even larger and more imposing than the one she had just passed through. However, this door had a high quality wood-grain finish and was thick and solid. It wasn’t the thin pasteboard one saw everywhere else these days. There were ornate golden trimmings and a thick brass doorknob, which indicated influence and wealth to Selena. She was all the more intimidated now. Perhaps that was the purpose of the door and the waiting room. Could all of this have been built with such intentional design? Selena didn’t want to even consider the minds that would be involved in planning something like this. She shivered and opened the door slowly before entering the doctor’s office.

The doctor was seated at the back of the room, in a comfortable and obviously expensive old chair. He had all the trappings of patriarchal authority about him, with his silvering hair, horn-rimmed glasses and pinched facial expression. To Selena, he seemed like the stereotype of an old-fashioned schoolmaster, the type who wielded a ruler and used it with relish.

He grinned in acknowledgment of her as she stepped cautiously into the room. Unlike the receptionist's smile, which had seemed to Selena to come genuinely from within, the doctor's was an obvious fake. It was the kind of smile one brought out only on occasions to make others feel at ease, rather than to reflect one's own feelings. It had the exact opposite effect on Selena.

"Come right in, Ms. Roberts. Sit right over here. I hope that Ms. Goodloe was courteous to you."

"Ms. Goodloe?"

"Yes, my...administrative assistant. No doubt you met her when you first arrived."

"Oh yes. She was very pleasant to me."

"Excellent. I honestly don't know what I would do without her sometimes." He turned away from Selena to glance down at his clipboard, which he seemed to look over intensely, ignoring Selena.

"I've never had one of these evaluations before," she spoke up apprehensively. "I'm not quite sure what to do." The awkward silence unnerved her and she thought to break the ice. Anything to move the procedure along.

"Of course you've never had one before, Ms. Roberts. You only have the one visit. That's all that is necessary," he responded in a patronizing tone, as if he seemed irritated at having his thoughts disturbed by her. "And as for what's required of you, all you have to do is answer my questions as honestly as you can. We just want to know a little more about you, to understand you better. Do you have any difficulty with that?"

"I guess I don't have much of a choice in the matter," she answered with resignation.

"Hmmm...that sounds almost like a hostile response. Do you resent having to come here?"

"No, of course not. I...er...no, I have no problem at all."

"Ms. Roberts, or may I call you Selena? Selena, are you being totally honest with me? Isn't there just a little resentment on your part for having gotten summoned here?"

"Well, no...there's no...I mean, I'm not angry or anything. It's just...I don't understand. Why me?"

"It's nothing personal, Selena. Millions of people all across the country are evaluated every year. I can assure you that there's nothing unique about you in your case."

“Then, it isn’t because I’ve done something wrong?”

“Why, Selena? Have you done something to be ashamed of?”

The intense stare that he had used at first had gradually changed into an uncomfortable leer, one that seemed to penetrate into Selena’s mind, trying to ferret out her secrets.

“No!” she responded defensively. She did not want to give this man the wrong answers. Not that she had any idea what the right answers were.

“You seemed to answer that a bit too quickly, Selena. Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“No, of course not. It’s just...I don’t want you to get the wrong idea about me, that’s all.”

“What idea would that be?”

“Well, you know...I’m not political or anything. I just do my job and that’s it.”

“That’s it? Is that all there is to your life?”

“Well, for the most part, yes.”

“Do you like your job? Does it give you satisfaction?”

“Yeah, it’s okay. I mean, it’s not very stimulating, but it pays a good salary. And I’m good at it.”

“And that matters to you, being good at your job?”

“Well, yes. It’s important.”

“So you consider yourself a hard worker, then?”

“Yes, I would.”

“And what about your colleagues? Do they seem to be hard workers also?”

“I guess so...I don’t really interact with them very much.”

“You don’t?”

“No, it’s not that kind of environment. We’re all much too busy.”

“It must get quite lonely at times.”

“Yes, sometimes it does.”

“You probably have plenty of time to think, I would imagine.”

“Now and then, when things are slow, I suppose.”

“During those times, what do you think about?”

“Excuse me?”

“Any private thoughts, things that you imagine, things that you don’t tell to anyone else?” he said with an unnerving grin. The doctor then leaned in closer to her, his eyes narrowing their focus. “Come now, there must be some things that go through your mind when your supervisor isn’t around.”

“No, nothing. Nothing important, anyway. I just think about...stuff.”

“Stuff?” he said with curious satisfaction, sounding as though he had found what he was looking for. “I’m sure you can elaborate on that.”

Selena was at a loss for words. How did someone explain the random musings that passed through one’s mind during the quiet moments of the day? Could there be any rhyme or reason to them? “I...I just think about my life,” she answered honestly.

The doctor glanced down again at his clipboard and began to scribble something down. After thirty seconds of this, he looked up to resume his questioning.

“Tell me, Selena. Are you satisfied with your life?”

“What do you mean, satisfied?”

“I mean, do you like where you live, for instance?”

“Sure I do. It’s a nice place. The neighborhood is quiet. It beats having to live at home, I guess.”

“And that would be a problem with you?”

“What is?”

“Living at home. With your mother. Do you have any problems with her?” Selena sat up in her chair at that question. Just what prompted that, she thought.

“No, my mother and I are very close. No problems there at all.”

“I see.”

“Look, just how much do you know about my mother?” she asked, defiance creeping up in her voice.

“About as much as I know about you,” he responded matter-of-factly.

“Well, if you know so much about me, then what is the point of these questions?” she asked in exasperation.

“To find out the things we *don't* know about you, Selena” he shot back at her with just enough authority to remind her who was in charge of this session.

“Now, Selena” he continued, “tell me about your reasons for moving out of your mother’s house. Did you want to have more privacy when you invited men to sleep over?”

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The interrogation (Selena no longer thought of it as an evaluation) seemed to go on for hours. It was as though every answer she gave only provided fodder for more questions. Each new question became increasingly uncomfortable and personal. She was surprised when the doctor informed her that their time was almost up. She startled herself as she glanced down at her watch. Only an hour had gone by. She sighed with relief. The ordeal was finally over. As she got up out of her seat, the doctor stopped her.

“Selena, before you go I have just one more question for you.”

“Er...okay.” She anxiously waited for him to ask as he paused to wipe off his glasses. Tiny beads of perspiration had formed on the surface of the lenses during the give and take of his interrogation.

“Do you consider yourself to be a good person?” he asked plainly as he regained his professional composure.

“I..I’m not sure how to answer that. I like to think so,” she answered with finality and honesty.

The man said nothing for a moment as he slid his glasses back on, considering her response. “Thank you for your time, Selena,” he said finally. “That will be all.”

That didn’t sound at all reassuring to Selena. “Doctor, what happens now?”

“You can go home now,” he said. “Someone will contact you shortly regarding the results of your evaluation.”

“And then what will happen?”

“Then, Ms. Roberts, you will know the truth. Good day,” he responded curtly. As far as the doctor was concerned, that was the end of the matter.

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Soon after Selena left, the doctor called Ms. Goodloe into his office.

“Well, Doctor,” Goodloe asked with bubbly enthusiasm, “what do you think of our Ms. Roberts? Or is it too soon to tell.”

“No, Goodloe,” he sighed. “I’ve made my determination already. I could read that girl five minutes after she walked through the door. The rest of the interview only confirmed my initial reaction.”

“Oh, dear. Then you found something out about her? I was so certain that she was a solid citizen,” she despaired.

“Well, nothing outright, but the potential is there. The hostility and cynicism are there, just under the surface. I doubt she even realizes it, yet. But just the same, I give her an even chance of becoming an undesirable, being recruited by one of the political cadres, or going nuts within the next ten years. Either way, she’s no good to society and a potential danger in the long run.”

Ms. Goodloe nodded solemnly. She had worked with the doctor long enough to respect his professionalism and his qualifications. “I assume, doctor, that you’ll want to go ahead with the standard procedure?” she asked softly.

He nodded his head in a positive response and reached for a pen and sheet of paper. He quickly put his signature to it and handed it to Ms. Goodloe.

“You have your authorization, Goodloe,” he said, in keeping with procedure, like he were following a familiar script. “Proceed at your discretion. Be sure to make it look like an accident. We’re not looking to send any messages to anyone here. We just want it over and done with.”

“Of course, Doctor.” she turned to leave, but the doctor stopped her with his voice, having something more to tell her.

“Oh Goodloe, it’s up to you, of course,” he said, showing just the slightest bit of sentiment. “Just remember that the girl hasn’t actually done anything yet. There’s no need to make her suffer any more than necessary. So, if you can, try and make it as painless as possible.”

“I was thinking the very same thing, doctor,” the woman replied. “She reminds me so much of my niece.” she mused as she left the doctor's office to plan her next assignment.

She was, after all, the consummate professional.