

Bitter Tea

Meredith Staub

Boil the water. Pour it, steaming, into a mug that fits your mouth with a handle that fits your hand. Place the teabag carefully into the water. It will float, then darken, then sink. Amber tendrils will flow from it, staining the water, flavoring it. Now it is time to wait.

My mom always said I never cried. My family jokingly called me a Vulcan when I was younger, after the emotionless, logical aliens of our favorite TV show. I loved the comparison. Vulcans were not emotionless; they were just in control of their emotions and did not let them take over. I liked that I had that ability, to look at things objectively, to choose what I let other people see. Vulcans were strong. Vulcans were intelligent.

When I started taking a medication that affected my hormones, I found out what it was to truly cry. To cry for minutes, for hours, for a day, with no way to stop until my body decided it would stop. I cried at throwing away crumpled receipts, I cried seeing a balloon floating away into the sky, and I cried while cleaning the kitchen on spring break because of nothing. Because of nothing. My doctor changed my brand. My crying stopped. I have not cried for nothing again.

Never leave a teabag in the tea. Bitterness is wrapped in the leaves, hidden, and when the teabag is left too long, the bitterness is slowly released.

I sat on my couch. *A mistake*, my mind whispered. *A mistake, a mistake, a mistake*. But I couldn't stand any longer. It was either sit and stare at the clock or stand and stare at the clock, and my legs were tired of the latter. I couldn't take my eyes from it. 8:36. Plenty of time to dry my hair. Plenty of time to get dressed. Plenty of time to leave. 8:37.

I was not sad. I knew sad. I knew how it felt to see that balloon in the sky and the receipts in the garbage. But I could not go to work. And as the time passed and the clock read 10:57 and I had moved to lay in my bed wide awake with my hair still wet, I missed my French class. I was not sad.

The bitterness hidden in tea leaves is invisible. You will not see it seeping into your drink. You will not know how long is too long, and how late is too late.

I didn't sleep in. I would wake up. Sometimes I would make it to the bathroom to brush my teeth. Sometimes I didn't make it that far. Then I would look at my clothes, and find that I could not put them on. I couldn't move. I couldn't even reach for them. Why would I? Why should I? Sometimes it happened at night. I would come home to do my homework and be unable to reach for my backpack. I would sit. I would stare. I would not sleep. But at the same time, I was starting to realize that I was not fully awake.

When I was a Vulcan, I could be sad. I could calm myself down and look at the

sky and feel better and decide to go do something that made me happy. I could take the teabag out in time, add some cream and sugar, and my tea would not be bitter. But this feeling, this feeling that was not sad but took me miles away from happiness, I could not handle. It was a pit, and I could not climb out. The string on my teabag had broken and it had sunk to the bottom where I could no longer see it.

I broke down studying for the physics GRE. I started sobbing uncontrollably, consumed with the knowledge that I would not get into the grad school I wanted, and that I was a failure of a physics student for not being able to answer these questions. Comforts were lies to my ears. Once again, I could not stop until my body decided it would. But this time, there was no inanity to my sadness, no unintentional tears for paper or balloons, just a suffocating hopelessness that left a pit of dread in my stomach. The next morning, I woke up. But I was not awake.

My tea is not your tea. It is a different color, a different leaf. My depression is not your depression. And it is not my mother's, or my aunt's, or my grandmother's. If minds are unique, then a disease of the mind has different flavor in each mind.

I am almost awake. I am so close to awake. I will be awake again.

A fresh teabag is in my mug, and the kettle has started to whistle.