

Chez le médecin

I glimpse the doctor and one of his patients as I enter the waiting room. They are at the other end of the hallway, sitting across from one another at the doctor's desk. They're speaking, but I can't hear what they are saying. And my French isn't great, anyway.

I sit down in one of the chairs in the waiting room. The walls are white and besides the orange plastic chairs that remind me of junior high, the only furniture in the room is a table covered in magazines. I unzip my backpack, and pull out the magazine I borrowed from la *médiathèque*.

I page through the magazine, "*Psychologies*," knowing that I won't be able to concentrate on it now. I'm ill-at-ease with medical visits.

There is an article about why a clean house signifies a clean mind and another about increasing self-confidence. After a few pages of ads, there is an article about the best ways to detoxify, accompanied by pictures of soups and homemade teas.

I glance up and perceive the doctor. He is standing at the threshold of the waiting room door, watching me. He is dressed casually in a dark blue fleece, grey slacks, and simple black shoes. He has a round face and he wears gold-rimmed glasses. I believe Théo said that he's Indian.

"Bonjour," I say. "Uh, je suis –"

"Venez, venez," the doctor says, beckoning to me.

I rise from the chair and pluck up my backpack and magazine. I approach the doctor, who has stopped next to one of the examination rooms.

"You, you're a friend of Théo Daumier."

“Oui, c’est ça,” I say. It’s the phrase I always use. Literally: *yes, it’s that*.

Théo brought me to see this doctor a couple of months ago when I needed the signature of a medical professional to play indoor soccer. I’m surprised that the doctor has remembered me.

“Asseyez-vous.” The doctor pats the patient bed.

I sit down.

The examination rooms have three walls and thick yellow curtains act as a fourth. The back wall in this room has shelves stacked with various medications. My heart thumps uncomfortably, my forehead breaks out in sweat.

“What’s the problem?” The doctor asks.

For once, I wish he would speak to me in English. So often, I’m frustrated when the grocer, or the librarian, or the waiter realizes that French isn’t my first language, and, craving a bit of practice, “helps” the conversation along with broken English. Maybe the doctor thinks it wise for me to exercise my French, or maybe English isn’t in his arsenal.

“I’m coughing and I have headaches. My stomach has hurt for a week.”

“So, you have a cold.”

“Oui, c’est ça.”

The doctor takes my arm and presses two fingers to my inner wrist.

“It’s very fast.”

“It’s because I’m afraid.”

“You’re afraid?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” he looks at me intently, gently.

“I have fear of seeing the doctor.” I laugh a little bit. Maybe what I have said is offensive.

“You have a fever.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“I think I’m warm because I was walking very quickly. It’s warm outside.”

“No, you have a fever,” he tells me.

The doctor wraps the blood pressure cuff around my bicep. He pumps the cuff full of air, and I feel the heavy heartbeat in my arm.

“You’re already getting better,” he says. “Less anxious.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

The doctor listens to my lungs. He tells me to breathe normally. I take deep breaths, which isn’t breathing normally, but I think that’s what he wants me to do.

He looks at my tongue. He imitates what he wants me to do after he tells me. (He opens his mouth wide and makes the *ahh* sound.) The doctor looks in my ears, and he finds nothing.

He peers through his gold-framed glasses with his little black eyes.

“Do you eat well?” He asks me.

I shrug. I haven’t been eating well. I’ve been eating a lot of chocolate. I’ve been stressed. Chocolate and yogurt. Pudding. Bread and cheese.

He touches my upper lip. I have a sore there. I’m surprised that he is touching it with his bare hands.

“You need vitamin C. What do you eat?”

“I eat vegetables.”

“Like what? Give examples.”

“I eat broccoli, cucumbers –” I pause, racking my brain for other vegetables that I know how to say *en français*. Broccoli is the only vegetable I eat on a regular basis. “Also carrots. And also fruit. I eat a lot of fruit.”

“Fruit is good for vitamin C,” he says. “But be careful. Fruits are very sugary and you will gain weight. You should lose a little bit of weight, a few pounds.”

He smiles. His teeth are clean and white and slightly overlapping. I notice that his hair is combed over the center of his head in an attempt to hide that he is rather bald.

“You need more protein. Do you like fish?”

“Yes.” This is a lie. I don’t like fish.

“Well, then you must eat fish. I can prepare a very good fish for you. Or you can eat fish at a restaurant if you like.”

I shrug.

“It’s as you like,” he says.

“I also have a yeast infection,” I blurt out. I feel my face redden. *Une mycose*.

“You have a yeast infection?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“It’s intimate.”

I wouldn’t know how to express this, except that I’ve self-treated multiple yeast infections since arriving in France. Now, I can walk into a pharmacy and expertly express my ailment. For a few moments, I project the illusion of fluency.

“How do you know that?” the doctor asks. “How do you know that you have a yeast infection?”

“Because, I’ve had them many times in my life.”

“Does it itch?”

“Yes.”

“It’s not necessarily a yeast infection.”

He scratches my arm. “If that itches, on your arm, it’s not necessarily because you have a yeast infection.”

I nod at him. Nodding is a habit. I want to understand.

“Do you have *un copain*?”

“Eh...”

“A boyfriend. You have a boyfriend?”

I had understood his question, but I wasn’t sure how to answer.

“Yes. Yes,” I say, nodding hard.

“Do you take the pill?”

“No.”

“What do you use?”

“Condoms.”

We use condoms, Théo and I, who is decidedly not my boyfriend.

“That’s why. Synthetics create problems for the vagina. The pill does too.”

“So,” I say, “it’s better not to have sex.”

“No,” the doctor says. “You need to have sex. It’s best if your boyfriend can control himself. Then you won’t need condoms or the pill. That’s the most natural.”

The doctors in the US have always vehemently encouraged condoms, even when I've told them I was in a committed relationship. I suppose that they view their words as a liability; they must consider what you'll do with their advice.

The doctor tells me that I should have lab tests done, which I will do tomorrow morning. Those tests will confirm whether I have a bacterial infection, or a fungal infection, or nothing at all.

I'm sitting across from the doctor, his desk between us. On the wall behind him is a picture of two polar bears. I asked him about it last time when I came with Théo. *The icecaps are melting*, is what he told me. *It's a real problem*. I had agreed with him. I probably had forcefully nodded. *I understand*.

"Do you have *une carte vitale*?" the doctor asks.

"I don't, but I have this."

I search in my backpack for the paper which temporarily provides proof of my French social security number.

The doctor studies it. Then, he begins entering information into his computer.

Leaning against a bookshelf that spans the entire wall to my left, is a painting of a woman. I don't remember it from last time. The brushstrokes are gentle, the colors soft and glowing. The woman is wearing a purple dress and a big matching hat. One of the sleeves of the dress is coming down, and the upper portion of one of her breasts is exposed. The subject's face is indistinct - blurred, but pretty.

"Do you think you have a fever?" the doctor asks me, glancing up from his computer.

"I don't think so. I didn't note it."

I don't understand why he should ask me. He had a thermometer, didn't he? And he'd already said that I had a fever; he'd told me earlier.

"When my mother asks what I have," I ask, "I tell her that it's what?"

It had been my mother encouraging me to come all along. I avoid visits to the doctor. But my Mother had sent daily emails inquiring about my health since my coughing fit on the phone.

The doctor regards me seriously. "You say as little as possible. You say that you have a cold and that you're a little homesick. You don't want your mother to worry. Understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Good. Mothers don't need to know everything." The doctor studies me intently behind his desk and gold-rimmed glasses.

"Do you sleep well at night?"

"It depends. Two nights ago I didn't sleep at all." I correct myself. "Or not well at all."

"Tu es *une fille anxieuse*." He tells me. "Do you understand *anxieuse*?"

"Yes." I say. "Ill-at-ease." *Mal à l'aise*. I like the sound of it, and the literality of the translation.

"You should have a massage every day. I could do that for you."

"But how much would it cost?"

"It would be free. Some things are more important than money. Work for example. To be nice to people. Love."

He must have expected me to respond more quickly than I do, because after a moment he says, "You understand?"

And I say I do.

We are in the examination room again. This is where I am to get my massage.

“Do you get massages?”

“From time to time. Théo gives me massages.”

“It’s Théo, your boyfriend?”

“Yes, but we’re not – he is leaving in a few weeks. For London.”

“How does that work?”

“He is young. He needs to travel a bit. To see the world. He wants to speak English.”

The doctor shakes his head. “I don’t agree with it,” he says.

I laugh.

“He can speak English with you.”

I shrug. “I don’t know.”

“*You*,” he enunciates, “*tu es une gentille fille*. Tu comprends?”

“Yes, yes. I’m nice.”

“Do you think that you are nice?”

“Yes. And I think it’s important to be a nice person.”

“I agree,” the doctor says.

He moves away from me and pulls the drape closed.

I lie down when he instructs me, where he instructs me. I put my face against the soft, dark mustard-colored blanket on the examination table.

I’m fine.

He has asked me to remove my clothes, but this is what happens in France *chez le médecin*. My underwear is on and I’m fine.

The doctor massages my back and it feels good. He tugs at my skin, rolls it beneath his hands. He rubs my bare back.

When he massages the backs of my thighs, it makes me tense. Maybe he notes the tightness in my legs, because he returns to my back.

In the middle of my spine, he pushes hard.

“Does that hurt?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“That’s the stomach.”

“The stomach?” My voice is high-pitched.

A bell rings. Another patient has entered the building. The doctor calls to the person to wait.

From the shelf stacked with medicines, the doctor takes a gold square of foil. He unfolds it – it’s a crackly, gold sheet. He spreads it over me.

“Relax,” he says.

He leaves. I watch his shadow as he adjusts the drape behind him.

The gold sheet crackles every time I breathe in. It’s supposed to keep me warm. It does keep me warm.

I want to leave. I am getting bored and regretful. I *am* tense – I am a *fille anxieuse*. The doctor sees this.

Americans, we’re uptight about nudity and we’re uptight about sex.

I’m an anxious girl.

I hear the doctor speaking to the next patient. It is a woman who has stomach pain. She is constipated; she cries.

The doctor asks her if she is stressed, but his voice is not sympathetic. It's not like the voice he uses with me.

The patient says yes, she has a new job. She is stressed about her work. She sounds young.

I try not to listen. I study the poster across the room. It is the poster with two smiling women. The blonde I find unpretty. The more I look at her, the less I like her. Her appearance is boring. The brunette next to her is beautiful.

I'm a blonde.

The poster advertises HPV vaccination. I haven't had it yet.

The doctor comes back, and removes the gold sheet. He folds it and puts it back on the shelf. He tells me to turn onto my back.

He rubs my stomach, my upper chest. He never puts his hands on my nipples, but the tops of my breasts, he touches them. He rubs across them with his left hand and he places his right hand on my stomach. I flinch.

He must notice. *Je suis la fille anxieuse*. Still. He continues to rub his hands across the tops of my breasts and he rubs across my stomach, too.

The doctor rubs my face. I relax. It feels good.

He strokes my hair away from my forehead.

He tells me I need affection, *tendresse*. He asks if I understand, and I say I do.

"You will have that with me," he says. "*La tendresse*."

He massages my hands, and I notice how sweaty they are. He must notice too. He must.

He asks if I am cold, and I say yes.

He asks if I am ready to get dressed.

I tell him yes.

I start down the gravel drive, away from the doctor's office. I will go to the library and read outside in the sun. It feels like spring.

I turn back. The doctor is standing just outside the door.

"*Merci bien,*" I say. *Thanks a lot.*

The sun is shining hard. The doctor is a small man with a fat little stomach beneath his blue fleece.

I turn and continue walking. It's over and I won't go back.

I reach into my coat pocket and take out my phone. Théo has sent me a text asking me to stop by after the visit *chez le médecin*.

At the end of the driveway I take a left onto rue George Clemenceau.

I am walking straight into the warm sunshine when I realise that I haven't paid the doctor for the visit. He must realise it, too.