

The Tear Stopping Lab

She stands in front of a long mirror, hanging on the back of her bedroom door. She looks at herself. She focuses on how the buttons of her gray jacket tighten the jacket around her waist. She tries to judge whether she still looks thin and sexy through her corporate-style skirt. Her mom bought her this suit after she graduated from college in the hopes that she would wear it to job interviews. She never bothered explaining to her mom her passion for techno and trance music, her dreams of DJing, manipulating and mixing electronic sounds triggering a rainbow of emotions in a throbbing crowd. She knew her mom would laugh, or worse. She'd grow concerned that her daughter was taking drugs. It has been three years since that day, and today is the first time she will wear the gray suit out of her apartment and by choice, no less. She is filled with anticipation. A honking car on the street below restores her attention to the moment. "Move on, asshole" she hears from the street. She looks at her pink Hello Kitty wristwatch: It reads 7:15 AM. She decides she has no time to retouch her makeup. She doesn't want to risk being late. She is glad she looked at her watch. It reminded her to take it off before she leaves for her appointment. She already has her keys in her hand. On her way to the door, she jerks backwards and freezes in front of the bathroom mirror to look at herself one last time before leaving. She smiles. "What a costume" she thinks. "The things people do to hide themselves everyday."

She exits her apartment. She bumps into her Chinese neighbor in the stairwell. He barely recognizes her. Her red dyed dread locks are pulled back into a ponytail. She is wearing a cream-colored silk blouse with a suit skirt, stockings and elegant high-heeled black shoes. He gives her an apple from his grocery bag. She says thank you, she must run, she can't be late. She knows he doesn't understand a word she is saying. He has probably been living in New York for a few decades, but in this bubble world of Chinatown, where their building is located. He is more secluded and remote in his world than her Lower East Side, stoned, squatting friends are in theirs. She speaks with exaggerated gestures and movements,

severely wrinkling her forehead and extending both her arms as she continues down the stairs. She wants to show him how apologetic she is for not taking a few more moment to thank him. He smiles at her animated gestures. She thinks he understands. She must continue. He has been giving her apples a few times a week for the past year. She never has time to stop and talk. Usually she is going up the stairs at this early morning hour, with makeup smudged on her face, red dreadlocks flying everywhere, her tight nylon clothing dripping with sweat. Her aura always smells like cigarettes. Now, for the first time in a year, her Chinese neighbor inhales the citrus smell of her shampoo. She has been waiting for this day long before she even lived in this building.

Forty-five minutes later she enters the Lab through heavy revolving glass doors. It smells hygienically clean inside - an imported smell that the city of New York could not have self-produced in a million years, even in midtown.

“Welcome to the Tear Stopping Lab at Fifty Sixth Street and Lexington Avenue” a perky female voice strikes her from the right. She feels dizzy from the doors, but the florescent lights make her vision sharpen. She is in a large room lined with glass cases filled with glass frames in all shapes and styles inside. There are roughly forty people sitting in the formica seats set up in lines in the center of the room. This room is so clean, so anonymous. It reminds her of airport lounges. She turns her head to the voice that came from her right, and discovers a long counter with a dozen receptionists tending to customers. The receptionists are all wearing glasses.

“Ma’am? Ma’am? Welcome. Step up to the counter, please. Do you have an appointment, Ma’am?”

She has never been called Ma’am before in her life. She doesn’t like the sound of it. People who know her call her Vee Lee which is her DJ name. Strangers usually refer to her as “Hey,” and sometimes

“Hey, you.” She approaches the counter slowly. Behind it are five posters of Dr. Kcops with five of his success stories. In each one he stands tall in his white robe, hugging a smiling patient of a different color wearing a “professional” outfit of a different challenging career. Something feels very wrong. She can already smell disappointment. She remembers flipping through Time Out New York two years ago, looking for her name in the DJ lineup for a club listing when she discovered the feature article about this place. Only then did she understand the neon sign she had passed by so many times which had a tear drop in a red circle with a red diagonal across. She used to think it was some type of witty advertisement. The article spoke about a special eye doctor that made a fortune from his patented chemical formula that made people stop crying. The doctor was interviewed in the article and spoke of how he was a graduate student at MIT, when one day sitting in the lab, he accidentally mixed this chemical solution that dissolved tears. The doctor immediately patented the formula and began exploring its commercial applications. Today, there are five such Tear Stopping labs in the world, one on each continent. The North American Lab in New York was the first he opened (and by far his most popular), and he still serves customers at the lab daily. The others have four of his finest students presiding. The article ended on a tacky note that persisted in her memory. The writer asked the doctor how he even thought to try his solution on tears. The doctor replied that he was working late at the lab one night, wondering how he was going to pay back his graduate school loans when tears fell from his eyes onto the lab counter (where drops of his solution resided), and they instantly dissolved. Then the writer concluded with some cheesy remark about how Dr. Kcops hasn’t cried about money problems since.

She knew Dr. Kcops was a clever entrepreneur that commercialized his patent to build a fortune for himself, but somehow she imagined his famous lab would have more authenticity to it. She didn’t think the clinic would look like the average Lens Crafters Franchise.

“Can you hear me?”

“Yes, yes, of course. I’m sorry. I’m just really nervous right now. I mean, I’ve been waiting for this appointment for so long.”

“That’s OK,” the receptionist responds, “I guess that means you have an appointment?”

“Yes, sure I do.”

“Great. What’s your name” – “Veronica Welsh.”

“Your age, please...” – “Twenty-Four.”

“Is this your first visit, Veronica?” – “Yes, of course. I didn’t know you could have more than one. I mean the article said that all it takes is one visit.”

“Well, there are many articles written about Dr. Kcops, and most of them are highly inaccurate. Some patients continue their treatment at the Tear Stopping lab for years. Have you filled out our First Visit Form on our Website?”

“Well, no.” Veronica stands on her toes to whisper into the receptionist’s ear.

“You see, I didn’t fill it out because my situation is very special. The form cannot explain the reason I am here.”

“That’s OK. Every patient thinks their situation is unique, but most patients find out later on that their condition wasn’t that unique after all. You *have* to fill out the form. Or else I cannot let you in to see the Doctor.”

Veronica snaps her right hand fingers, which is her most assertive way to agreeing with anything. The receptionist shoves a clipboard with a pen and form into Veronica’s face. Veronica breathes deeply, and exhales into a wide, fake smile – the kind her mother taught her to put on when she was in Junior High, the kind of smile she hated so much. She takes the clipboard, holds her smile, and walks to find a seat.

“We’ll call your name when Dr. Kcops is ready to see you.”

Veronica almost trips forgetting that she was wearing such pointy high heels. She's used to platform shoes. She scratches her upper back thigh through her uncomfortable pantyhose and sits on a chair between a young man in an expensive suit and a middle-aged woman, wearing heavy perfume. The woman is pulling back her straight black hair into a ponytail as she weeps. She then blows her nose into a crumpled tissue.

Veronica adjusts her bum in her seat, tries to ignore the bizarre characters around her, and lowers her face into the form. There are a million little questions on this form.

Patient Registration

Name: Veronica Welsh Social Security: 036-31-5413 Date of Birth: 3/1/74
Gender: _ Female _ Male Profession: Music composer/ D.J.

How did you here of us? Time Out article
Have you or any of your family members been treated at the Tear Stopping Lab in the past? No
If yes, please specify name and relation to you _____

General Medical Information

Present Medication: none Allergies to medications: none
Do you smoke: _ Yes _ No Number of years: 10 How much: pack/day
Do you regularly drink alcohol? _ Yes _ No How many drinks per day: 5
Do you drink coffee? _ Yes _ No How many cups per day: 3
Are under a lot of pressure at work: _ Yes _ No Please describe: in life, not work
Have you ever consumed psychedelic drugs? _ Yes _ No How many times: 3 (mushrooms)

Personal Tear Information

How often do you cry? Never
For how long do you cry? N/A
What helps you stop crying? N/A
What causes your crying?
a. Love (or lack of love)
b. The loss of a loved one.
c. General emotional abuse.
d. Financial hardship or job related stress.
e. Other (please specify) _____.

Veronica feels the immense head pressure she used to experience while taking exams in high school. This is why she hated school so much, she thinks to herself. “I don’t want to choose one of several options. I tried it before, but my category never exists on the paper.” She doesn’t want to stop crying at all. Her situation is so different. But this form is what stands between her and the Doctor. She must pass it. She flips the form over, swiftly, like an over-easy egg on a pan, and looks at all the insurance questions she cannot answer either. She glances over the headings: “*Patient Employer Information, Insurance, Information and Assignment of Benefits*” They seem to be written in a foreign language. She does not know what any of them mean.

A phone ringing distracts her from her form. “Hello?” The weeping woman to her right answers her cell phone. “Oh how are you? Where are you?” ... “Was your flight OK?” ... “No, I already know, they canceled because of some concert tickets they forgot they had. Is your meeting going OK? When are you coming home?”....

The woman’s voice sounds so perky, so fake.

“Oh, I know it’s early.” She continues. “I just thought I’d get a head start on some food shopping for tonight. Actually, I’m in the supermarket right now. It’s a great time to shop, you know? There’s nobody here. There are absolutely no lines.”

Veronica raises her head to look at the woman talking on the phone. She stares at her fake mask of smile, while her face is still wet with trails of tears.

“Wow, this asparagus looks lovely. I’m going to get some for us. OK, darling, I got to go. I’ll talk to you later. I love you” The woman hangs up.

Veronica looks around. Some patients make eye contact with each other. This cell phone conversation seems to have created some closeness between the patients. It brought a common thread to their consciousness. They are probably all lying to someone close about their whereabouts this morning. Yet

they all know the truth about each other with out even knowing each other's names. There is one old native American man sitting in the row across from Veronica. He is wearing a cheap light blue suit and his face is wrinkled with deep lines. His face is a map to his harsh history. There is a beautiful blonde woman in her twenties that Veronica thinks she recognizes from a Fox TV series. She is wearing gym clothes (she probably lied about having gone to the gym.) Next to her is another face, and across to their right, there is another long bench with a face, another face, and a few more faces. Most people are reading fashion and health magazines, but some eyes are also surveying each other – peeking at their peers from behind colorful, square shields of glossy magazines. Veronica notices a young black boy with an afro and huge curious brown eyes sitting by himself.

“David Harper,” the receptionist calls, and the boy stands up and follows the receptionist down the hall. He is alone in the lab and is holding a beaten-up Raggedy Ann doll close to his chest. Tears are running down his face. Veronica wonders whether he should see a more conventional doctor, one that can prescribe him Ridelin or Prozac.

The woman puts her cell phone away, and turns to the man sitting beside Veronica.

“So why are *you* here? You don't strike me as the type that would need to *learn* how to stop crying?”

She develops an awkward yet flirtatious smile, second-doubting her invasive question.

“Well, I guess I put on a good show, then. I'm here for the same reason you are. It's hurting my career, if you know what I mean.”

“Your career?” the woman questions.

“Yes. Well, I'm an investment banker. I work on Wall Street. It's bad to cry when you are a banker. It shows you're a real person – one who contains weaknesses within. I find it to be very inefficient. It

dampens my productivity, not to mention hurting my image, and business confidence.” He fixes his square glasses and then restores his hands to his lap.

“Your colleagues don’t cry?” the woman asks. Her voice rattles now, as she slowly returns to her sulking self.

“Maybe they do, but not in public. It’s not that I cry in meetings and conferences either. I cry alone, at home or sometimes in a movie theater. I have ten-hour crying sessions that last the whole night.

Sometimes I have to call in sick because I just can’t stop crying. People look at me at work and they can tell that I’ve cried, or that I’m the type that cries. I guess you can’t blame them for using it against me. I mean, would you want someone who is so weak to handle your company’s public offering?”

Everyone is silent. It seems like a rhetorical question, but Veronica doesn’t really understand it. All she can think is that she would never trust someone who doesn’t cry. That’s why she can’t trust herself. But she is interested in finding out more about this banker’s crying. She loved hearing crying stories. Silence sits thick in the room. Veronica doesn’t want the conversation to end.

“But why do you cry?” she asks.

The banker brings his fingers to his closely-shaven chin. “Well, I’m not really sure. But I think I have come up with a few theories.” He speeds up his chin rubbing as he searches for words.

“Steven Myers.” The receptionist announced. “Doctor Kcops is ready to see you.” The banker stands up and apologizes for ending the conversation so abruptly. He shakes Veronica’s hand very firmly and hands her a business card from his pocket. He repeats this ritual with the woman to Veronica’s right, and says, “It was a pleasure, really. Keep in touch. Shoot me an email or something.” And he follows the receptionist down a narrow hall towards the Doctors office.

“What a strange character,” Veronica thinks. “He seems so automatic in his behavior and even he can cry. Why can’t I?”

She thought of her last night with Stephano. She came home at six in the morning after spinning at Shine all night. It had been a long night, and all she felt like doing was crawling into bed with Stephano and falling asleep with her head on his chest. She wanted to shower before she got into bed, so not to join him smelling like nightclub smoke. She found him awake, reading a book on the living room's sofa. She came to greet him with a kiss and he backed away, saying they need to talk, saying this isn't working, they aren't working as a couple. He thinks he doesn't love her, this isn't working anymore. He needs to think as a single unit for a while. Maybe they should talk in a few months and see where they were. Who knows, maybe things will look different in a few months. He said all this as if it were on the tip of his tongue for hours, and he was waiting for her to come back, to dump his thoughts on her, and leave himself clean. "OK," she said through her exhausted eyes, barely holding up her lashes with a night's old coat of cheap mascara. He then stood up, and said that he should leave their apartment for a few days, give them both time to think. He stood up, and only then did she realize that he was fully dressed. He picked up a suitcase, gave her a kiss on the cheek, and exited the apartment. She remembers her reaction even more vividly than his speech. She looked at their empty apartment. She took off her nylon pants, and g-string underwear, then her sweaty halter-top. She got into the shower. As the water sprinkled on her face, then dribbled down her body she thought of the two years they had spent together. How he courted her at first, switching shifts with other bartenders so he could work whenever she performed. Then the night he folded her a rose from three cocktail napkins and told her that he understood that he didn't really know her, but he might be in love with her anyway. The day they moved in together was a cold day in December. After the movers delivered all their furniture, they went and got their bellies pierced together on St. Marks Place. In the evening, they hooked their bellies to each other, took a self-portrait with the timer, and sent their friends the photo as a Christmas greeting.

She closed her eyes and turned off the shower water. She never thought of Stephano in a lover's way again. She wrapped a towel around herself and felt so clean. She stared at herself in the mirror and thought of all the little things she had to do. She'd have to transfer the lease to her name, or maybe get a new apartment, one she could afford by herself. She remembered a DJ at Sway telling her he was moving to London. She wondered who was going to take his Chelsea apartment. She could definitely see herself living in Chelsea. Maybe she could get his lease. Oh, shit, there was the whole marriage thing, too. They married a year ago because Stephano was from Italy and he needed a green card to work. She would have to file for a divorce, consult with a lawyer, tell her friends they broke up, find someone else to go to movies with... Why didn't she cry? Why wasn't she more hurt? Why was she not angry with him? She thought she loved him too. Why was she not heart broken? All she remembers thinking of is all the annoying errands that their break-up created. Asleep that night with her shower-wet dreadlocks spread on the pillow, a fresh "To Do" list emerged in her mind.

"Veronica Welsh" The receptionist says. She stands up instinctively, and looks at the people around her.

"But you were here before me," Veronica says to the weeping woman to her right.

"Yes, but the Doctor prefers to see young people first," the woman explains "Its easier to cure young people, so he'd rather take care of them first. Before crying becomes part of their way. Besides, they require less of his solution, so they're a better investment, so to speak."

Veronica smiles at the woman, not knowing if she is serious or kidding. The woman returns her token fake smile. "It's much harder at my age," She says as she blows her nose into her handkerchief, "I've been here five times and I still can't stop."

The receptionist takes Veronica's clipboard, places it under her armpit, and guides her down the hall.

They pass the banker on his way out. He has a fierce smile that exposes his sharp upper teeth like shark fins. He looks hungry. "Good luck," he bends down to say straight into Veronica's eyes, the way he was

taught to speak to people in business school. Veronica is startled. She almost trips over her own feet as the receptionist points to a room at the end of the hall.

She sits on a black leather couch in a room full of plants and framed diplomas. At its center, across from the couch stands an oak desk with 8"x12" standing family photos and five mini sculptures in glass and gold with different award titles. This office looks like part of a sitcom set. It is all just too typical Veronica thinks. She crosses her legs and closes her eyes. She doesn't think. She tries to listen to the beat of her heart and mix around it some drum and base in her head. She is all anticipation. "Please make me cry. Please make me cry. Please make me cry."

"Well hello there," Doctor Kcops remarks, stirring the air in the room as he closes the door behind him. "Okee dokee, let's see what we have here." He sits at his desk and begins flipping through a file with her name hand-written on its label. He has perfectly smooth skin, fluffy salt and pepper hair, and a Hollywood smile. "I see your form is incomplete. There are a few important questions I will need answered before I can begin treatment. For example, what causes your crying?"

"Why does that matter?" She uncrosses her legs and grips the couch with both her hands at her side.

"Well," the doctor scratches his perfectly shaven chin. "Contrary to what many believe, not all crying can be cured. For example, tears caused by physical pain, or loneliness are usually a breeze. I can cure them in one session with the application of a few tear stopping eye drops. But tears caused from a broken heart... boy, those are a lost battle. I have patients that have been coming here for years with their anguish and heartbreaks, and I keep telling them there's nothing I can do.

"Then why do you still see them? I don't get it," Veronica asks. She can't stand him already. She doesn't even know what she is doing in this lab of quick fixes. She feels like she's participating in some stupid infomercial. She should have known better than to follow the advice of a Time Out article.

“Well, Veronica, the situation is not as simple as it seems. Some patients beg, they think my patented solution will help them, and in turn, I hope that if they believe in it so strongly, maybe a placebo effect will occur, and they will self-heal. I should tell you that this rarely happens. But in any case, we are here to talk about you today, not other patients. Tell me how often you cry, and what are the reasons for your tears?”

“I don’t. Cry, that is. That’s the reason I’m here. I’ve never cried. That is to say I don’t remember myself crying. My mother tells me that I used to cry as a child. But somewhere in my past I stopped. I don’t remember what it feels like. I’ve interviewed everyone I know about it. I’ve read every book I could find on the subject. I’ve heard so many accounts and read so much theory, that I think I now understand crying intellectually. I just can’t do it myself. I’ve tried chopping onions, hurting myself, thinking about awful tragedies like rape or the holocaust. It’s useless. I fantasize about experiencing the release that people tell me comes from crying. I dream of going through that emotional storm to reach the quiet that comes after. But I’m telling you. It’s useless. I just can’t.”

Veronica rehearsed this speech many times and is happy with how it comes out. She feels relieved to have it outside of her. She re-crosses her legs, then uncrosses them and re-crosses them with the other leg on top. She studies the Doctor’s face for a reaction.

“Well, you know what type of work I do at this lab, right?” Dr. Kcops asks slowly in his radio phonic voice. Veronica grinds her teeth and is just about ready to stand up and leave. “Of course you do.” Dr. Kcops corrects himself as a form of apology. “You clearly researched the subject thoroughly.”

He taps with his fingers on his desktop, twists the thick gold ring on his index finger, and then grins.

“Well, was there anything traumatic about your childhood that made you stop crying?” The Doctor’s voice is weak and hesitant now. He speaks like a substitute teacher. “Let me tell you a short story. There is a small village in Southern China of fairly old women who are all blind. Not one of them can see. Doctors have examined their eyes and they seem to be in perfect health. 20/20 vision. The only medical explanation for their blindness came from one German psychologist. You see, during the Japanese invasion, these women watched Japanese soldiers murder their husbands and rape their children. The Japanese invaders tied these women up and made them watch the slaughtering of their families. Most of them had heart attacks or were later murdered. But the 62 widows who survived this dreadful act of cruelty all went blind. There is no scientific explanation for their blindness. The German psychologist suggested that their minds ordered their eyes to shut off. Do you think your mind orders your eyes not to cry?”

Veronica adjusts her bum in her seat and gives up on crossing her legs. She rests both feet on the floor with her legs slightly open.

“No Doctor. I had a pretty good childhood.” She runs through her history in her mind... loving parents, plenty of friends. She wasn’t weird back then. She had a date for the prom. He was a pretty popular guy. She thinks maybe one day...

“I think maybe one day I decided it wasn’t cool to cry. It was a sign of weakness and I am so strong. I always wanted to be strong. I wanted everyone to know that I was strong, so I just stopped crying. And then there was no longer a reason to cry. Just like I decided to be a DJ and became one. Just like I wanted Stephano and I got him.

“That’s rather unique, this power you claim to possess over yourself. Thank God none of my patients are as strong as you. Otherwise I would be out of business.” The Doctor laughs loudly with an open mouth, and Veronica is shocked at how perfectly straight his white teeth are. They must have cost a fortune.

She is not amused. She is disgusted. She wants to spit into his open mouth, to make him disgusted as well. He notices her seriousness and apologizes for his rude laughter. “Well, what do you do when you’re sad? How do you release your sadness?”

“I have different theories about this. I think I might release it through my music; maybe that’s what people mean when they tell me I’m an intense DJ. My music contains my tears. Sometimes I think I pee instead, or cause rain. Because a few times when I felt sad it started to rain.”

“Well, don’t you feel sad now? I mean you’re dying to cry and you can’t. It’s a pretty tragic predicament. You think you are so strong, but you are the only person I know that is not able to cry. Aren’t you saddened by this reality, Veronica?”

She stands up. “Of course I am. I’m afraid that maybe this is all just a symptom. Maybe I really can’t feel. Sometimes I’m convinced that I can’t. I watch the news about starving children in Africa, and I don’t care about them. They are not in my life or my living room. I can’t possibly feel their pain within my skin. It hurts me more when I break my fingernail. But that doesn’t really hurt either.”

Veronica looks Doctor Kcops in the eyes. She senses a fresh enthusiasm within him. He fixes a picture frame on his desk and then studies her with a piercing look. Is he flirting with her? It can’t be. Than why does he seem so excited? She develops a theory in her mind. He wants to make her his new poster child, go with her on talk shows, become the expert doctor to analyze her rare disease. Maybe he’s even thinking up medical papers he could publish in scientific journals. More prizes, perhaps, to enhance his

trophy collection. “The Veronica Phenomenon.” That’s a great title. It sort of rhymes. Maybe he’ll run some tests on her, find some new chemicals to sell along with his tear stopping solution. Make more millions, write more self help books, open a flagship lab in every major city, every suburban shopping mall. God, how she hates the suburbs, Veronica thinks.

“Never mind. I’m leaving,” she says.

The Doctor rocks back in his chair. “Are you kidding me? You must have waited years to come see me. You’re not just going to leave, not before I give you my advice.”

“I don’t care anymore. Can’t you see? I don’t even care about my problem.”

She stands up, lifts one leg at a time, and gently removes her silly, elegant high-heel shoes, one at a time. She holds them in her hand, and walks out through reception, feeling the cold floor on her feet through her thin pantyhose. She thinks of the bills she should pay, the birthday of a friend, and how she hasn’t yet decided what gift to buy her. She reminds herself to buy a thank you gift for her friendly Chinese neighbor. Fuck it. She doesn’t even put a fake smile on for the waiting room psychos. She looks at their kookoo faces, and they look like cult members now. She pushes the heavy revolving doors and finds herself thrown out onto a densely humid morning sidewalk. She pees through her stockings. Clouds thicken and blacken. A thunderstorm begins to emerge in the sky.