

Seeing Clearly

THE CHALLENGE: Write a short story of 650 words or fewer based on the photo below.

Out of more than 200 entries, *Writer's Digest* editors and forum members chose this winner, submitted by Eva Schultz of Naperville, Illinois.

The late afternoon sun is dipping into evening, and the market is painted with hazy light. I'm tired from walking too much in my cute sandals; I don't know why I always forget that 40 isn't the new anything. I'm bending over to adjust an ankle strap when someone bumps against me. His bare leg brushes mine.

That's all it takes. I can see his future in a flash—he's gazing off into the distance and doesn't see the car barreling into the market. It's all over in an instant. I don't want to see the aftermath, but I see it anyway.

I've had this "gift" ever since puberty—with skin-on-skin contact, I can see a person's final moments. At first I tried to use my visions to save people—chasing, begging, crying—but it never worked. After a year in the psych ward as a teenager, I learned to shut up and let fate win.

Nowadays, I work from home, have my groceries delivered, never touch anyone. It works, but it's so lonely. I'm not sure why I thought coming to the local food festival was a good idea. The plan was to come late in the day, once the crowd had started to thin, and live like a normal person for a couple of hours. Or so I'd hoped.

I look up at him, and I'm struck by how young he is. He's got to be a college

kid—T-shirt and khaki shorts, backpack and baseball cap, an earnest attempt at facial hair. He's staring at me with a look I haven't seen in years. It's the look that comes into their eyes when I tell them what I've seen: fear, dismay.

But this time, I didn't say anything. How does he know? I step back, mumbling, "Sorry." He opens his mouth, hesitates, shifts his paper plate of lo mein between his hands. He's trying desperately to figure out what to say. I recognize every gesture. And suddenly, I understand. "What did you see?" I ask him.

Panic flickers in his eyes, chased by confusion.

"When you touched my leg," I say. "You saw something bad." Now my brain is catching up to what I'm saying, and a shudder of fear passes through me.

"How did you know?" His eyes widen in realization.

"I can see it, too," I tell him. "Any time someone touches me, I can see how they ... " I can't say it out loud, so I do the one thing I never do. I put my hand on his arm.

The whole thing flashes in my mind again—his distant gaze, the out-of-control car, his backpack on the pavement.

I let go of his arm and look into his eyes, as if I can see my future in them if I try hard enough.

"You need to go," he tells me.



"I think we both need to."

Finally it all clicks for him; now he understands how terribly mutual this is. "I've tried to stop accidents, but I never can," he says. "Do you think we really can change anything?"

"I don't know," I reply. "But it's worth trying, don't you think?"

Hope blazes in his eyes for the first time. "Come on," he says. "Let's get out of here."

I fall into step behind him. He glances back at me and smiles, then gazes off toward the parking lot.

My blood freezes as I recognize the moment. There's a roaring sound—is it the car, or is my own heartbeat in my ears?

I grab his arm with both hands and throw myself backward.

We land in a heap as the car sails through the space where he was standing and smashes into a food cart.

I'm alive. For the first time in my life.