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*Kathryn Willoughby*

It is breakfast, or lunch, or snack, or Ensure supplement time. I have been sitting at this table in this hospital since the day my mother was born. The wood chair with its crisp edges has gone soft. It is tired, I am tired, the nurse near me sighs so I know she’s tired, too. I have been crying since my grandmother took her first steps, so I don’t notice until my fifth sip of the ironclad nutritional supplement. I set the Styrofoam cup down softly. With my hands two pounds lighter, I discover I do not have hands. Did I ever have hands? I wipe my eyes until dry. I cannot feel the stretch and pull of my fingers. My nerves have gone soft. But that’s not what has me scared. I cannot see my hands.

When I was in the first grade, it was discovered that I needed glasses. I wasn’t doing well on the weekly spelling quizzes, and I was a know-it-all, so Mrs. Duvall knew something was wrong. The optometrist was that cheesy kind of doctor. I was precocious enough to hate him for patronizing me. (But, yes, I did take the smiley-face sticker. Sue me, I was six.)

I climbed into the leather chair and lined my eyes up to the kaleidoscope of lenses. It is always the same: there is a yellow, one story house on a green hill with a blue sky. Then, there is a red dot on a dirt path, receding to the horizon. And then, what is expected from sitcoms: the letters. They show you five small letters, which always include C and V, say “clearer” or “less clear,” and you’re done. I had never met a test I didn’t desperately want to ace, so I took my time on this, trying to figure out what the right answer was. I knew I was smart. I wanted to be smart enough to know all the letters, no matter how blurry they were. I wanted to be superhuman. Naturally, my first pair were wiry, blue, and not the right prescription.

The culprit is haloperidol, but I am too frothy to see this yet. My vision is going and I didn’t even get to say goodbye. The images in front of me recede to a few colors – the mustard walls, the mahogany floors, and something somewhere is white. In my time at the
Sheppard Pratt Mental Health System, the clock on the north wall had become my friend. Halfway through my stay, I couldn’t handle the possibility of eating any more (drink three Ensures in one day and then judge me.) Because of this, I was a permanent fixture at the south table, the “fuck your insolence, time to snap out of your long-term psychiatric disease that has plagued you since childhood” table. It was the table for glaring nurses, for sighs and eye-rolls.

But, from my seat, I could see the clock. It was white, basic, and I made a game with it. I would sob until I felt I could sob no longer, and then I would see how long I had been crying for. At some point, I figured, the nurses had to understand I wasn’t going to drink another ounce, and they should let me get up. I found 10:30 (an hour after breakfast finished) to be the cut-off point. The nurse would just be sick of me. (Unless, it was Ashley. Ashley was the devil. One time, a person with an eating disorder punched Ashley in the face, and she went into psychiatric nursing as part of her revenge plan. Probably.)

But now my vision is disappearing. The clock is receding into the horizon like the red dot. Soon, the white color of it is gone. I should be panicked, but my nerves are watered down.

My in-patient psychiatrist was just as sick of my “rebellion” as the nurses, and so she had me taking haloperidol before every meal. Sedate me and force-feed me. Haloperidol is not a medication for anxiety, you see – it’s an anti-psychotic, the kind that makes you easily controlled. I am being muted into obedience. My eyes turn feathery, and I melt.

At some point later, I am told I “did a good job” – for once, they got me to finish my drink.