

Woman without Time

by Elizabeth Kate Switaj

The men who have come to take me have science on their side. I know this is true, and yet I sit on the same bed I've had since girlhood, unable to move myself to pack even a pair of socks. What does one wear at the asylum anyway? Pajamas? Certainly my suits will be useless. Maybe I should pack some books. I don't even know how long I'll be there. I don't if they'll fix me or even if they can.

I also don't know exactly what the problem is. I have had no symptoms that I know of: no pain, no rash, no fever. Until my thirty-second-year exam, I had no idea that anything was wrong. It started out fine with my weight, pulse, and blood pressure all on the low side of normal. Then the nurse left with her starched white cap, and after half an hour that I spent taking English quizzes on my cell, was replaced by a doctor in a wrinkled white coat.

He sat down at the desk without look at me and read through my chart. Finally, he turned to face me and asked if I could hear the clock.

"The clock?" I glanced around the room "I don't even see it."

He sighed. "I mean the clock in here." He patted his vaguely convex abdomen.

"I don't understand. You swallowed a clock?"

He fished around in the desk drawer until he found a small mechanical box with earphones attached. He scooted his chair next to the bed where I was seated and handed me the earphones while keeping control of the box himself. "Put these on. You need to raise your hand right when you hear a tone in your right ear and your left when you hear it in your left."

Available online at «<http://fictionaut.com/stories/elizabeth-kate-switaj/woman-without-time--3>»

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After several rounds of testing, the doctor took back his device and returned it to the drawers. Without looking up from the clipboard on which he was writing, he informed her that her ears were fine. "So you will need to go to a specialist in clocks."

"Clocks?"

"Yes, every woman has one in her."

"You're kidding."

"Your mother should have told you, but perhaps it is not her fault. If she had children young enough, she never would have heard it."

I bowed my head and blushed even though he still wasn't looking at me. My mother had been carrying my eldest brother at her Adult Day ceremony. No one had told me of course: I had figured out the dates and the odd pudg in her picture myself. Despite my shame, I managed to stammer the question of what exactly my clock was.

"The specialist will explain better." He rolled his chair over to me again and handed me a nearly illegible note. "Give this to reception, and they will make you an appointment."

A week later, I once again left my house four hours before work and got off the train at the stop for the Women's Hospital. This doctor, slightly rounder than the first and with eyes large enough that he could almost pass for a foreigner, looked at me when he came in and sat at the desk. "So you've never heard your clock," he began.

"I didn't know I was supposed to have one until my exam."

"Right. That's what your chart says, but it never hurts to check." He stood up and approached me while removing the stethoscope from

his neck. "Now, I need to find out if I can hear it." It seemed as if he were listening to my stomach, but after several minutes, he frowned, shook his head, and returned to his seat.

"Did you hear it?"

He shook his head. "But that doesn't necessarily mean anything bad. Sometimes other people cannot hear a clock that works perfectly well. I'll need to ask you a few questions to know for sure. Now your chart says you are unmarried. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"And no unplanned pregnancies?"

"Or planned."

"Yes, I already asked if you were married. No abortions?"

"No."

He scribbled down a few notes then threw the clipboard onto the desk. "What do you think is the oldest age a woman can have a child at?"

"The oldest . . . ? Wasn't there a woman who was sixty-something . . . ?"

"A few years ago, yes, but that's rare. Science tells us that most women lose the ability to conceive in their forties, and it becomes more difficult years before us. Now, it varies from woman to woman, so how do you suppose that a woman knows when her time is nearing an end?"

I had to admit that I didn't know.

"That is why women have been made with clocks inside them."

"I thought 'biological clock' was a metaphor."

"No, my dear, it's very real."

"Then perhaps I just won't go into menopause until very late."

"Hmm. It isn't likely. Tell me: do you have a boyfriend?" I shook my head. "Then it's downright impossible. Your clock is either missing or broken. Do you even want to have children?"

"I . . . I don't know."

He shook his head and sighed.

"Do you know how to fix it?"

He continued shaking his head. "Small problems I can fix with medication, but this is too severe."

"Does it really need to be fixed, I mean, why do I need to know when I won't be able to have children when I'm not even sure that I want to have them?"

"Because you're not sure, you need all the information to make the right decision. Besides, science tells us that when one thing goes wrong, the problems can spread."

"Isn't there anything that can be done?"

"I'll contact some researchers, see if they have any open trials or ideas. As soon as I know, you'll know."

One week later, I came home to find two men in lab coats drinking tea with my parents. They explained that, in order for me to be "properly treated", they would need to take me to their asylum. I was to be allowed one suitcase. Naturally, I didn't object, and I have no intention of doing so: they have science on their side, and anyway, my parents want me to go. My office lady gig doesn't pay enough for me to scrape up key money for my own place. Still, I just can't seem to get the energy up to pack.

Then, suddenly I do; I cram as much in as I can, throwing clothes and sundries at my suitcase with little attention to what actually gets in. I have to sit on it to zip it shut. At last, I am ready to leave, but I've left the window open.

