

## Numbered

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The DSM IV criteria for 307.23 Tourette's Disorder is multiple motor and vocal tics, for an extended duration, that start before a person is aged eighteen. But you don't just wake up twitching and shouting obscenities on your tenth birthday. It gradually creeps in like a fog. It was years before the graying veil on my eyes blocked out all light. But it happened, and there was nothing to see beyond the numbers, orders, cracks. Nothing to hear except guttural back of the throat moans, glass shattering chirps, and other noises reminiscent of humpback whale calls. One o'clock.

My older brother and I used to slide down the lower set of stairs in our split level on an old gray nylon sleeping bag. A laundry basket was just too unwieldy and prone to tipping for such full fledged adventures, but the bag was stable and provided a bit of cushion. And it went really fast. Occasionally too fast and I would crash down the stairs wrapped in a slippery cocoon that felt every shock from my tailbone to my cerebrum. The time came when I bashed my skull on the doorway and lay stunned for a minute too long. My brother lifted up my flat brown curtain of bangs to make sure I wasn't bleeding. Two o'clock, two o'clock.

"Jesus Cait, what happened to your eyebrows?"

I looked in the mirror, but nothing was wrong. The unkempt long hair of a tomboy and bangs cut with a ruler. A nose looked even from straight ahead, turned to the side it had a ridge from falling down so many stairs as a baby. My army green eyes stared out of my face into the mirror wondering what was wrong. Then he pulled up my hair and I fully understood his concern. My eyebrows were nearly gone. If he had looked closer he'd have seen most of my eyelashes missing as well.

The thing about Tourette's Syndrome is the side effects. It's not enough that you can't control your muscles or vocal chords. Instead, most people end up with the tacked-on burden of another psychological disorder—ADD, a temper worthy of a psychopath, echolalia, or, in my case obsessive-compulsive disorder. I would fixate over the slightest things, superstitions especially. Have you ever found an eyelash on your face? Once on the finger you blow it away with a kiss of breath and wish for eternal love and happiness. Maybe I was just impatient, but I didn't seem to shed eyelashes quickly enough so I resorted to pulling them out. Three o'clock, three o'clock, three o'clock.

Instead of telling someone about all the thoughts and shivers, I just slunk into the shell I'd built up. Being the odd one isn't so bad as long

as nobody notices. But my family began to notice a few of the physical manifestations of my unbalanced chemicals. My eyelashes were non-existent, eyebrows patchy at best. The sleek hair from Pantene commercials was never going to happen, I was too distracted pulling out each hair one by one. Only the darkest, thickest ones would work since the others were obviously inferior. They don't have that same sting, I couldn't feel the root follicle grasp desperately to my scalp.

Along with all these fun little physical deformations, I had thoughts and actions that could be defined as "crazy." The cafeteria in my high school had painted bricks the color of jaundiced skin. Brown nubby carpet lined the bottom third of the wall. Carpet that had been torn, shredded, and unraveled by years of students standing in line for lunch. This carpet always fascinated me. Fingertips are full of delightful little nerve endings, and mine were ecstatic about the tactile pleasures of coarse acrylic texture. That carpet was just so interesting. I would brush my right hand over it—index, middle, and ring fingers. My left hand would feel left out then, so I'd have to pretend to look behind me or check the clock that hung at the other end of that low-ceilinged cavern. Anything to give my left hand an excuse to run its own index, middle, and ring fingers over the carpet that the right hand had so selfishly enjoyed moments before. Five o'clock, five o'clock, five o'clock, five o'clock, five o'clock.

All of these antics would come and go. The pulses in my brain had an ebb and flow, just like the blood flowing through it. One week it was unbearable and next the motions were so common I did them unconsciously. Movements would slowly mutate over time. What started as stretching my muscles evolved into scrunching up my face until it looked like I was trying to impersonate a bulldog. The muscles were so tense I would get headaches. It didn't help that I had glasses and would often scrunch up my nose to push them further up. Killing two birds with one self-satisfying tic. When I got contact lenses, the motions relapsed into muscle stretches. I was a wind up toy, a rabbit when it sees a dog three feet away. Every muscle had to be stretched to the absolute maximum allowed. If my eyes weren't opened to the limit, then somehow they would slowly open less and less each day. Shoulders moved in an invisible square, stretch back, up, forward, and down as far as possible. I was constantly stretching for a marathon I'd never run.

When I was in third grade, I realized it wasn't normal to hum through musical scales in the hopes of clearing your throat of some imaginary object. We were reading *Where the Red Fern Grows* in class, and while sitting in my group in the corner of the class, they noticed. While someone told about their own sad dead dog story, I lost contact. My eyes slid out of

focus and I loosened up my throat—preparing for the chorus. It starts as a close-mouthed cough, then evolves into a long-winded sigh. The sigh creeps up the scale, then back down. Ever higher, ever lower. Noise emanates from my throat, but also my mouth. I would swirl the music around with my tongue. Pressing the vibrations up against of the roof of my mouth, then forcing them to the back of my throat, hoping to clear some unknown annoyance. I was only a third of the way through this routine when a muffled giggle broke my concentration and my vision slid back into focus. They gave me that furrowed look that dangerous children have and asked if I was talking to dolphins. My classmates never bothered me to my face, but I would not soon forget.

Did you know that if you drive through a yellow light you should always kiss the back of your hand, press it to the ceiling, and make a wish? Well I did. I knew it well, and did it every single time I encountered a yellow light. Stoplights didn't just warn me about oncoming traffic. I was special, they made sure all my dreams came true. After a while, I exhausted the list of ridiculous superstitions. In desperation, I had to come up with my own. Some people with OCD tendencies fixate on germs or accidentally burning down buildings. But those are just too depressing. The answer lay in numbers. That's where it's at. In all those numerous lists of weird things people do, numbers are the most interesting. And versatile. My obsessions were economical that way, I was never without something to focus on. Like my watch.

The first timepiece was from Target. For approximately ten dollars I was able to permanently affix my obsession to my wrist. How helpful to think I would never be without a reminder. The black strap and yellow face resembled a bumble bee if I squinted really hard, which incidentally I did. That digital watch was always on my mind. Number sequences had a certain allure. There's something fancy and wonderful about 12:34 that sparked a surge of chemicals through my brain. The same happened at 4:44 or 12:12. But the most intense satisfaction came from the strike of the hour. Time was so concrete at that moment, six-o'clock. Just the way it rang in my mind was such an endorphin rush. For those few seconds, I wouldn't pay attention to anything except for the miraculous event of time continuing on.

I had to mark this occasion somehow. Something as momentous and memorable should be recognized, right? So I did, by repeating the hour as many times as the clock face told me to. I finally had to put a limit on it—saying eleven o'clock eleven times takes quite a while, and it gets hard to remember how many times you've already said it. People didn't appreciate

getting yelled at because they interrupted me on the tenth repetition of twelve o'clock. I would have to start over and really, it only mattered if I could say it all within that first sixty seconds. Eventually, I settled on stopping at five. I would repeat the hours as usual up until six o'clock. I could tally each repetition on one hand at that point. Easily concealed, quickly repeated, and still able to worship the passage of time.

Then it broke. The watch, the mechanism that started and ended my day. The device that sometimes woke me out of my sleep to welcome another hour into existence. The plastic strap gave up and with it still in my pocket I made my mother take me to the nearest Target. They still had my precious bumble bee, but it wasn't really a bee anymore. It was the same watch, same design, different color. A silver android had replaced it, the mechanical beast to equal my own perfectionism. Those brief minutes without the bee showed me what had started happening to me. The white inch-wide brand on my wrist hadn't seen light in far too long. Neither had I. Now the actions were obvious. I would watch myself do them, thinking is this really necessary? I'd never been able to answer that. I still can't. I did these things because I did. The world wouldn't end if I didn't. But why take the chance?

At that moment, I saw all the twitches and heard the alien noises emanating from my strained vocal chords. It didn't make me stop though. Nothing can. I talked to my dad recently. I explained that I had been thinking about my childhood and the indelible mark this left. He was confused. This is my father, the trucker—the one I got my army eyes, my Amazon height, my sarcasm from. He should have noticed, but in our Scandinavian family we don't talk about mental illness. Someone just liked booze too much, or was sad a lot. There's a lot of skirting going on. I'd become too efficient. No one was aware of my addled neurons.

The thing about Tourette's, there is no cure. You can't take some injections or pop candy-colored pills. Therapy can help, but the only thing that will make a difference is time. My love, my numbers, would end up being the end of itself. As it went on, I marked its passage less and less often. Consciously at first and unknowingly after a while. Moments became little more than a beep marking the past. I don't lose any more time worshipping it, but I'll still acknowledge the wonder that is one o'clock. Plus my eyebrows have grown back—for the most part.

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While mashing up random credits into a degree, **Caitlin Johnson** has taken the opportunity to pursue hobbies. The surrounding landscape, people, and objects are all subject to documentation - either in writing or film.