

Seeing the Light

The school nurse knocks on the door of Mrs. Reed's room at Oliver Elementary, where I am in the third grade. The nurse is called Mrs. Markham. She is a plumpish woman, old like Mrs. Reed, and when she opens the door I see she is dressed in a nurse's white uniform with a white cap and white shoes – her usual attire. She pokes her head into the room. I see she is wearing glasses with dark frames, and has her graying hair tied up beneath her cap. I have seen her in the hallway from time to time in my years at Oliver Elementary, and she has never looked especially happy. I realize that I have never seen her smile. Maybe she thinks if she smiled, all of us children would pretend to be sick and want to come see her and then she would be too busy. None of us likes to be sent to Mrs. Markham, so she is not usually very busy. Today, she has come to take our class to the cafeteria, where she will give each of us an eye test. She does not look happy.

We follow Mrs. Markham down the hallway toward the cafeteria in single file. She looks back along the line at frequent intervals, giving us warning looks to remain quiet. Mrs. Markham has cleared a corner of the cafeteria to use for her eye test. She has placed two pieces of blue tape on the floor, twenty feet apart. She has drawn and cut two letter "E's" from a piece of poster board, and colored them black with a marker.

Still in line, we move forward to one of the pieces of blue tape. She gives the first boy in the line one of the "E's". Then she walks to the other piece of tape. She holds up her letter "E" and the boy holds out his "E" in the same way. She will hold it out sideways and backwards, not the way an "E" is supposed to look, and the boy will move his letter to match. Then the boy will give his "E" to the boy or girl behind him. This process continues until I am handed the "E".

I squint toward Mrs. Markham, trying to see her "E". I hold out my "E".

"No! Now pay attention," Mrs. Markham calls out to me. I can see she is moving her "E", shaking it emphatically at me. I make another guess. Classmates near me in the line snicker. Mrs. Markham yells for them to be quiet. My guess is a bad one.

"No, you are not paying attention," says Mrs. Markham. She decides to give up on me.

"Next!" I hand over the "E" to the girl behind me.

I get out of the line and stand with the others who have completed the eye test, all of them except for me doing well enough to satisfy Mrs. Markham. I feel embarrassment and shame for not being able to see the "E". I am angry at Mrs. Markham. It confuses me that she is testing my eyes, but when I can't see the "E" she thinks I am only stupid or inattentive, not that my eyesight is poor. I decide I don't like Mrs. Markham.

A few days after the eye test, Mrs. Reed calls me to her desk. I stand next to her chair as she points to one of my papers, which she has laid on her desk before me. I see a math paper, one containing addition problems we copied from the blackboard the day before. I love to do the math problems Mrs. Reed writes on the blackboard.

"These are not the numbers I wrote on the board," she tells me sternly. "You wrote down every one of these numbers with at least one or two of the digits wrong. You must learn to pay better attention."

I am very embarrassed. Classmates look at me from their seats. I worry that they think I am dumb.

She tells me, "Now, when you added the numbers you wrote down, you did get correct answers, so at least you know how to add. This makes me think you are not careful. You must look closely at the blackboard. You must try harder."

I don't tell Mrs. Reed that from my seat near the back of the room I can't see the numbers she writes on the blackboard. I think if she just moved me closer to the front of the room, I could see and everything would be fine. But she doesn't suspect my eyesight; she thinks I am only inattentive. This makes me angry, like I was with Mrs. Markham about the eye test. I do try hard at school. I know school is important.

I am bothered enough by these things to tell my mother that I cannot see Mrs. Markham's "E" and Mrs. Reed's math problems. I worry that she might be disappointed in me for my eyes. My mother smiles and tells me she expected I would need to wear glasses someday. She herself has worn them since second grade, she tells me. "You got your eyes from me," she says. I don't know how this could have worked, but I am happy that having bad eyes is not my fault.

My mother takes me to see Dr. Cromwell. Like Mrs. Markham and Mrs. Reed, he is very old. I sit in a chair and he swings a big machine in front of me. He turns out the lights in the room. There are holes in the machine for my eyes.

"Look through the holes," Dr. Cromwell tells me. I look through the holes and see a big "E" like Mrs. Markham's, and some smaller letters on the far wall. Dr. Cromwell moves his hands about on the machine and the letters become more distinct, until finally they blur. I tell the doctor about Mrs. Markham's "E".

"Yes, you take a size twenty letter and view it at a distance of twenty feet. If the letter is clear, you have what we call 'twenty-twenty' vision, which is normal eyesight. You need glasses," he tells me.

"I got my eyes from my mother," I tell him.

A week later my mother and I return to Dr. Cromwell. He places my new glasses on my face, then removes them and fusses with them for a while. After repeating this a few times, he seems satisfied and turns out the lights.

"Read the bottom line," he points to the far wall. I read a series of letters and numbers, and he switches the lights on.

When we walk from the doctor's office, I realize I have emerged into a new world. I see the tiniest details in the sidewalk under my feet. I see grains of sand in the old cement. I resist the temptation to count the blades of grass that now jump out of the ground with amazing clarity. The trees have uncountable numbers of distinct, individual leaves; street signs are startlingly vivid; clouds high in the sky above captivate me with their shapes. I read every car license plate, every storefront and traffic sign that I see on our way back home. For the first time, I see that there are words painted on the town water tower. I announce this to my mother, who tells me, "Well, of course." For the remainder of the afternoon, I point out to my mother the many wonders of everything around me, causing her to laugh and shake her head.

"Wait 'til it's dark and I'll show you something," she tells me.

I cannot wait until it is dark. I want to know why I must wait until dark for her to show me. My mother tells me to wait until dark, and I will know why. Finally, after supper is done and the daylight is gone, I pester my mother to show me.

“When I got my glasses, my mother showed me this,” she says. We walk outside into the backyard, where she looks up and says, “There they are.”

I follow her gaze and see the stars – but not as the fuzzy, faint patches that I had known for as long as I could remember. I see them for the first time as brilliant, blazing points of light.