

## Cyanosis

Finch pushes my hair back, the way she does. I wonder what she sees when she looks at me. Her eyes pierce me through, the crucifixion of sick, starving Chasey girl. I pull my hands away before my stigmata bleeds all over her and drips into her hot chocolate. Finch watches me sit there and not eat and put away black coffee (two calories) like it's my job. I feed my tremors and in return they pull my strings and I become a real human doll. My empty stomach rolls like thunder.

"Chasey girl, are you okay?" Finch is beautiful, objectively and completely. A cinnamon blooded december girl with crooked teeth and calloused hands. Her arms are softly formed with young teenage muscle, her legs are strong tree trunks that climb mountains and turn cartwheels. When she looks at me, the smooth stones in my intestines shift and my heart stirs from its hungry winter.

"Yeah, I'm good. I'm good." In the past three days I have eaten two hundred and forty calories. Yesterday, I was so cold my nails turned blue. Cyanosis. I looked it up, huddled over my anatomy book that is a week overdue from the library. Petal-blue discoloration to the extremities caused from under oxygenation. I am dying, Finch. I can feel my body failing. I haven't decided if this is a good thing.

She lets the subject drop, and instead settles for watching me clutch my coffee mug, leeching the heat back into my blue spider hands. Every sip added cadence to the static that was blaring in my ears. I couldn't tell if my heart was pounding or if it had stopped completely. Two hundred and forty calories. And water. My mouth tasted like dirty nickels. But then I stop drinking the water because I saw the scale number spike and instead tried to claw it out my stomach through my throat with two boney fingers. I am good. I am fine. Sip coffee. Smile, smile. Sipsipsip. Shakeshakeshake. Don't think about the way letting

the coffee past your lips and down your throat feels revolting, feels like failure. Her eyes seem to bounce from my body, skipping off all the sharp parts like light refracting from a mirror.

Finch recounts her day at work. She works in a ski shop, fixing board bindings and fitting ski boots. I like to imagine her working, when I'm trying not to think of food, imagine her deft fingers using whatever tools one uses to do up bindings. Her strong arms carrying boards across a snowy parking lot. Her body heat meets the air and vaporizes, a walking furnace. I wish I could sweat in the snow. I'm always too cold. Halfway through Finch's story of today's rude customer, I feel myself tuning out. My focus slips and I let my eyes close. Keeping them open requires energy I cannot begin to offer. The tinny christmas music piped in through the wall speakers swells, drowning all else. The smell of the stale blueberry muffins at the counter is overwhelming, I want to swallow the whole batch and then the cookies and the hot chocolate, the whipped cream, then the countertops and the sink...No. I'm not hungry. I don't like sugar. I don't like food. I don't need food. I don't...I grind the inside of my cheek into a bloody pulp.

"Chase!" Finch's hand is shaking my arm, jostling me back to the present. The christmas music has settled back into dull muzak. "Chase, are you okay? You're a really spacin' today."

"I'm fine," I say, not because it's true but because it's what's acceptable. "Finch, I gotta get home. It was nice to see you. I'll call, okay?" I stand up too quick and my vision blacks out. I feel myself tipping towards the floor; the fluid in my brain is raining down my spinal column. I catch myself on the table. My arm burns where Finch had been holding it. I don't look at her as I totter my way out of the coffee shop and into the blizzard. Sometimes, I cannot spend another second looking at someone who loves me. I collapse into the front seat, heart thumping unevenly. The cavern of the car is freezing, my breath comes out in clouds. I lean forward and rest my head on the windshield. I stay there, hunched over, too tired to

shiver, until three quick raps on the passenger window jars me upright. Finch peers in from the outside, eyebrows pinched together with worry. I roll down the window for her. I only let her in partway.

“Chase, are you okay? Why’d you bolt?” There is no judgement in her voice. Finch is love, she does not have it in her to be anything but concerned. But even she can get frayed around the edges. She’s seen this song and dance so many times.

“I’m good. I’m good. Just kinda tired, you know? I should head home before the roads get icy.” My hand twitches to roll the window back up before she can say anything else, but Finch places her gloved hand on the glass.

“Chase...I’m worried. You’re getting bad again.” A switch flips inside me. Conversation over. The walls slam up, the drawbridge between us is raised. I become an armed fortress.

“You’re just projecting.” Why did I say that? “I’m just tired, Finch. Can you please let me go?” Finch removed her hand from the glass and stepped back. I hated the way I talked to her sometimes. But I couldn’t go down that avenue with her. There was too much to talk about. I was like a bombed out building: the only way to figure out why the detonator went off was to start sifting through the gravel. There was too much wreckage. Finch’s eyes were dark now. She wasn’t angry. She was never angry with me. It made her hurt that much worse to look at. I rolled the window up and clicked the car into drive. Pulling away from the sidewalk, I left Finch standing there with all the love I did not know how to process. She stood there till I turned the corner, watching me leave.

Time slips like water down the drain. It's there, it's there, and then it is gone. I wake up in my bed, shivering, unable to remember the drive home. I am still in all my clothes, my leggings, jeans, two shirts, a sweater, a coat. The room is dark, the house is heavysilent. From my mother's room floats the soft buzz of late night television. I had slept through dinner, again. My mother had long since stopped waking me up for it. It really did not matter much these days.

The memory of Finch standing on the curb, her shoulder collecting snowflakes as she watched me drive off, resurfaces in my mind. Her kind eyes haunt me. They remind me so much of my father. Sometimes when the house is dead, and I am dead too, I let myself remember my father. Honey skin, morning gray eyes. He was an army man, a soldier who had me young with my mother and shipped out not much later. I got sick while he was away. I got sicker when he died.

But before I was sick and he was sad, he used to bounce me on his knee and tuck me in at night and look at me with those patient, kind eyes when I screamed and tantrumed at him. Like Finch, he never seemed to get angry. He was gentle, such an unlucky trait for a soldier. When I was older, I began to notice the way he'd changed when he was home. He stopped sleeping at night, would pace the kitchen for hours, or sit smoking on the backs steps. Or he slept all day, swallowed whole by blankets. If he was truly and deeply asleep, I'd fit my little body next to him in the blankets. I wouldn't sleep. I would just feel the way his body breathed and smell his familiar smell. The times when he was home though, before it got bad, he would sing to me when I helped him cook dinner or weed the garden.

One evening, he stood at the counter chopping onions, singing, "*...I'm headed to a land that's far away, beside the crystal fountain. Come with me, we'll go and see, the Big Rock Candy Mountains...*" This had always been my favorite song he sang. I liked it so much, loved imagining wide skyscraping

peaks of pink candy mountains. I imagined sinking my teeth into them and crunching all day on sugar crystals. I sat on the counter beside his cutting board, watching his deft hands use the big chopping knife.

“Dadda, where you go... is that where the Big Candy Mountains are?” My five year old mind imagined my father in his fatigues camping in Candyland. My father chuckled and looked at me so warmly I giggled and kicked my sneakered feet.

“Yes, it is, Chasey girl. And I’ll bring you back some of that rock candy the next time I ship out.”

“I hope you go soon.” I said, grinning. Something in his smile flickered. His eyes darkened.

“Soon enough, Chase.” He went back to his chopping. I knew something had shifted, but couldn’t figure out what had made my father look at me with such sad eyes.

Eventually, my eyes became like coffins: something in people died when they looked at me. The week before an IED swallowed him whole, he cried with me over a grainy, lagging video call.

“Chasey girl,” He said. He was the first person to call me that. “You need to beat this. You need to bury your shame where it lives. Kill it where it stands. I can’t bear to watch you die like this, baby.” I am trying Dadda, I am killing my shame but it lives inside me. How do I kill the things that live inside without killing me too? I am still trying to figure it out.

I blink away my father and for a moment I am thirteen again, Finch and I are out on a summer night, told to go play outside because my father was sleeping. She knows I am watching her. She turns great big pirouettes, her roller skates scraping the pavement suffused with the cicadas’ song into a gentle evening ambiance. She is young. There are still A’s in my report card and strength in my teeth. I am a real girl who laughs and eats and chews pink bubblegum. I watch her, the way her skirt flutters in the breeze

as she turns, her knees socks beginning to slip down. A bandaid barely hangs onto her scraped knee, the gumminess nearly gone. We are young, we dream of biting through the crust of the earth and swallowing the world raw. She sees me there, sitting with my knees to my chest in the street, and skates to me. Grinding to a stop, she reaches down, her little legs bowed out for balance. I knit my hands into hers and let her pull me up, feeling my own skates begin to slide under me.

“It’s no fun by myself, come skate with me.” Finch says. Her hands were sticky, grape flavored popsicles kind of sticky. This is the last summer I will turn my tongue purple and grin sugary sweet. I do not know this yet. I focus on my hands in hers, her gap toothed grin, head thrown back laugh. Often times, I go back to this memory. Finch, the best part of me. Skating circles into the summer evening, wearing ruts into the street. I am not sick yet, I am whole and peach-fuzzed, skinning my knees and falling in love with the way my best friend laughs.

My eyes open. The image of young Finch, strong tree trunk limbs and calloused hands, fades. I lay on my side, boney knees huddled to my concave chest. I think of Finch, who eats when she is hungry and talks with her mouth full. Who rubs my back when I am dizzy, always dizzy, and ignores the ridges in my spine. Finch, who is effortless. Finch, who whispered in my ear at a sleepover that she was scared I would evaporate.

I think of my father and his Big Rock Candy Mountains. My father, who always believed I would get better, who died on foreign soil in a million pieces and the cookies I refused to eat at his funeral. Who tended the garden and taught me to plant carrots. Whose wide, rough hands never seemed too big for mine. My father, who was scared I’d die before he got back home.

It takes me hours on top of hours to gather the strength and braves to slowly pull myself from the swath of blanket. My marionette body drags itself down the stairs, the strings once again luring me to the

den of my sins: the kitchen fridge. My blood altar. For once, I swallow my courage, pull a strawberry (four calories) from the basket. With shaking, fearful hands, I bring it to my lips, force my mechanical jaw to open and close down on the sweet red flesh as though I am praising a vengeful god. I bury my shame where it lives.