

I Only Cut Onions on Sundays

Cathy's mother makes her cut a bag of onions every Sunday. She's watching T.V. when the mother calls her and groans inwardly. She secretly doesn't want to do it on this particular Sunday, and yet she shrugs her shoulders and still makes the effort to move into the kitchen.

She sees the bag of onions, and she feels like they greet her like they have been waiting for her arrival, like they have all the time in the world to relax and lounge on the kitchen counter. Even from a foot away, Cathy can smell them. When she thinks of Sundays, all that comes to mind is the peculiar pungency of this vegetable that pokes and prods at her senses until she cries. It is all she knows because crying has been required of her for as long she can remember. Each onion bulb reminds her of the universe, every individual layer makes her think of eternal life. Circle after circle, the onion continues its motion. Will she always be forced to cry on Sundays?

Sometimes, her eyes start to water just from thinking about onions—she hasn't quite figured out if it's from the smell or what they represent in her mind. She doesn't like having to chop them into tiny pieces because they all end up in the garbage disposal; it's such a waste, but Cathy's mother incessantly reminds her that every drop of her blue ink tears is valuable. Cathy's tears help pay the bills her father left behind when he left their family. Even though he left when she was only three, her mother says they still have debts to pay, so she doesn't argue. She can hardly remember who her father was and knows that she should try her best to help her mother out since it's just the two of them.

Cathy's face has light blue stains that start underneath her eyes and lengthen down the rest of her face. The asymmetrical stains zigzag around her face because she doesn't know how to cry in a straight line yet, and her mother assures her she will figure it out eventually. However, Cathy doesn't mind that they look crooked because they match her nose. Her mother has learned

that hairspray and acetone can remove ink stains from skin, so the stains are not as dark as they used to be, but it doesn't change the fact they're still there.

Her dainty fingers grip the knife, and she works the blade into the onions with swift and nimble precision. She's had so much practice cutting onions that she tells herself she can probably make it through the whole bag with her eyes closed. A familiar smell starts filtering around her nose, and she counts the seconds until her body reacts.

Three—two—one. Detonation.

The first tear of the morning staggers to the bottom of her face slowly. It outlines the curves of her nose before wobbling down her lips and dripping onto her blue shirt. In an effort to save money, Cathy's mother refuses to buy clothes for Cathy unless they are blue because she has ruined too many white shirts while crying.

"Have you started to cry yet?" Her mother sticks her head into the kitchen and looks at her with wide eyes. She doesn't like wasting any of Cathy's tears, so it is essential for them to begin collecting the tears as soon as they start to fall. Her mother will take this batch of tears and bottle them up to sell, just like she does every week.

Cathy just nods and continues to cut the onions while her eyes keep watering at an increasing pace. She hears her mother rustle around the kitchen, probably in search of a container to gather the ink. She thinks to herself that she can probably be a professional vegetable cutter because of all the different ways she knows how to slice onions. By the time she's finished cutting the first onion, her mother has shoved a medium sized bowl under her face to collect her tears. The sight of her tears in a bowl, a hoarded commodity, creates a welt of emotion that moves from her throat and sticks to the back of her head, resting behind her eyes. She sticks her tongue out and licks her cheek to taste the ink while her mother's head is turned. Every time she

tastes her tears, she half-expects them to taste salty like everyone else's and is almost surprised at how bittersweet they are. She doesn't know how she can forget the taste of ink. Sometimes she wishes she could escape her gift—as her mother calls it—and experience a day with a nice, normal face without ink stains. There are so few people like her in the world, she should feel special, but she mostly feels alone.

Cathy's mother keeps her attention on her daughter—she doesn't trust Cathy enough to capture every single tear—and she doesn't notice how perfectly Cathy juliennes the pound of onions. Instead, she just keeps her eyes fixated on the bowl of profitable ink.

Cathy is ten. She watches her mother, who is carefully bottling jars of ink, from afar and her curiosity pours out of her. She's always wondered why her mother wants her to cry. They watch sad movies like *Old Yeller* and *Marley and Me*, and Cathy has to hold a jar in her lap in case she cries. She wants to know why her mother bottles the tears and sells them away to people, but she's always been too afraid to ask. It first started when she was seven and since then, her mother sits at the kitchen table to bottle the ink every single weekend. Her mother saw a documentary about a man who also cried ink during the American Revolution, and how his tears were a cheap alternative to actually buying ink. From this documentary, she and her mother learn that there are still people out there who are willing to pay large amounts of money for tear ink. It's a kind of collector's item because of its connection to the past. Because of this, Cathy's mother never has time to take her to the park or the mall. On weekends, Cathy usually watches the television or her mother. Why are people fascinated with her tears? Do they actually use them or do they sit on a dusty shelf? They're just tears, after all.

“Mom,” she asks, moving closer. “Why do you do that when I cry?”

“What do you mean?” her mother snaps.

Cathy can tell her mother is irritated that she’s disturbed her and immediately regrets asking the question. “I—never mind. I’m sorry for interrupting you.”

Her mother sighs. “Just ask your question, Cathy.”

“Why do you have to do this every weekend? Can’t we do something fun?”

“This is just how things have to be for a while. We don’t have much money, and this is the only steady income we have right now while I look for a job.”

“And after you find a job?” Cathy is full of hope for the future.

“Things will change, I promise.”

Cathy is a crybaby, but she tries to save her tears for Sundays.

She is sitting in class when she hears someone whisper about her.

Her classmates don’t understand why she doesn’t just dye her whole head blue because they think her white blonde hair with blue streaks at the bottom is weird, and she knows some of them are angry that she’s made it to high school without being forced to recolor her hair by the administration. A concerned parent once brought up the issue to Cathy’s middle school principal, and a committee was formed to come to a decision on how to proceed. It was against the school’s dress code to have hair dyed unnatural colors, but Cathy’s mother protested the idea of having to dye her daughter’s hair. She said by having to dye Cathy’s hair a single color, she would be telling her daughter that her tears were unnatural and she should be ashamed of them. The committee eventually came to the unanimous conclusion that it wasn’t Cathy’s fault her hair was multicolored, so no further action was taken.

Though there are others like her, there's no one else like Cathy at her school. The few friends she had growing up had already trickled away by the time she reached the eighth grade. It was after people heard about her mother selling the ink. She doesn't know how relate to people her age because she doesn't look like everyone else, and she knows that this is the reason why. People talk to her occasionally, but she's never invited to parties or even to just have lunch. She's reached her sophomore year essentially friendless, like she's a ghost who roams the halls of her high school.

Still, Cathy's never minded that her hair is two different colors—she just wishes people would care less. She normally ignores what people say about her, but because she's so tired from watching sad movies the night before with her mother, the snide comment makes her eyes water. She knows the blue streaks on her face are more prominent than usual because she spent the night crying into another bowl of ink. She didn't expect to cry during every single movie and didn't have time to wash her face before going to school.

“Does her face look blue-er to you?”

Depending on the reason why she cries, Cathy's ink tears can vary in color. Her mother says she came out of the womb with cornflower blue tears. Onions make a sapphire blue. Sad movies make a dark, Atlantic blue.

To make a bigger profit, Cathy's mother bottles and sells the tears by the different shades Cathy can produce. She keeps the jars of ink locked inside a cabinet in her bedroom so Cathy can't use them. She doesn't know that every so often, Cathy sneaks a small jar of ink out of her mother's room. Cathy usually waits until her mother falls asleep to break into the cabinet, but sometimes she feels bold and steals the ink while her mother tends to the garden outside.

Stacks of paper with blue paintings lay hidden in a corner of Cathy's bedroom closet. Cathy has discovered that if she mixes the ink with a little bit of water, the result is something that resembles watercolors. She paints portraits of frowning girls in all blue and feels like they are kindred spirits. They can't help that they are blue because that is how she creates them, and they're frowning because she is scared to paint an imperfect smile. She hopes that one day it will just click in her brain because the pictures will be prettier with smiles. Until then, Cathy's okay that the girls continue to frown.

"She probably didn't wash her face."

"She shouldn't be allowed to come to school unless she makes herself look presentable. Could you imagine if any of us had blue hair? We'd be sent home before first bell!"

A few tears roll down Cathy's cheeks as she blinks, and she cannot help but stare at them, completely fascinated by their pigment. They are a rarity because she only cries steel blue ink at school, and these tears are so scarce that she has never cried enough to fill up a small inkbottle. She has never told her mother she can cry steel blue tears because she does not want her to sell them with the others. Like the unsmiling girls, these tears are a few of Cathy's secrets.

One day, Cathy's mother realizes that maintaining the integrity her daughter's talents would have to be a full-time job.

"I think we need to expand my business," her mother tells while they eat dinner.

Cathy freezes in the middle of chewing her spaghetti. "What do you mean? Aren't you looking for a job?"

"There are more and more people interested in collecting the tears, Cathy! We've paid off most of your father's debts and can live comfortably from now on. Don't you want that?"

She knows it's a rhetorical question and doesn't answer.

"We could buy a new car," her mother continues. Cathy sees a manic glint in her mother's eyes and it scares her. "You can get some new clothes. Our lives will be better."

"No," she chokes out. She feels her throat start to constrict, like there's no more air left in the room because of her mother's words.

Her mother's eyes narrow and zoom to her face. "What do you mean *no*?"

"I want us to be a normal family. I want to be a normal teenager. I'm thirteen, but I'm trapped inside this house when everyone else I know is out doing things with their friends and families. Normal thirteen-year-olds play sports and go shopping with their friends, but all I do is sit in here and cry!"

Her mother's eyes turn into rocks as she stares at her daughter. She puts her fork down on the table and folds her hands in her lap. Cathy sees them twitch slightly. "What are you trying to say?"

"Can't we just do something fun for once?"

"This business isn't a joke. If we want to keep living like this, we need to continue making higher profits. I don't understand why this is so hard for you to understand. I don't think I'm asking too much of you."

"But I don't *want* to cry so you can sell my tears anymore! If we don't need the money, then why do I have to do it?"

"Cathy, I don't think you realize that you don't have a choice."

"But I do have a choice—it's my life, I can do whatever I want—"

Before Cathy can finish, her mother is out of her seat, pulling Cathy's arm, and shoving her into her bedroom. She doesn't say anything to Cathy; she just looks at her with harsh

disappointment. When her mother leaves, Cathy locks the door behind her. She's learned that sometimes it is better to just do what she is told to do even if some promises are broken.

In Cathy's dreams, she swims in a sea of colors. Her hair whips around her face like a fire, and her skin is like pure sunshine. She feels wild, free. The violet-colored clouds see her smile and mimic her happiness as they dance and swirl in cheery spurts of movement against a rose-colored backdrop. She's lying down in a field of green flowers that extends underneath her body in a crisscross of directions, and when she inhales, it surprisingly smells of lemongrass. Yellow and orange bulbs of strange, fuzzy light float around in the air and surround her, but she finds them oddly comforting. They remind her of tiny fairies from the storybooks she used to read as a child, guiding her and keeping her safe in a cocoon of colored light. She imagines if they could speak they would say, *don't worry, we will protect you*. She is content.

Her calm contemplation breaks when a small scream echoes in the distance. The scream causes her stomach to fall into a pit of blackness because her bliss has been short-lived. It sounds like her voice, but it didn't come from her. Before she can identify where the scream came from, a tornado of blue wind blasts its way into her line of vision. Paralyzed with panic, she watches her colorful world desaturate in a nanoseconds.

With a fluid-like grace, the blue twister sucks her fairy companions into its spiraling body. It rips the color pink out of the sky, which becomes a long strand that flashes like a whip as it too becomes a part of the blue storm. Cathy clings to the ground beneath her and notices her seemingly infinite field has become a small patch of green that barely outlines her body. She can't find her voice to scream or the power to run, and she just watches mutely as the tornado quickly claims her last piece of freedom.

A figure slowly emerges from the heart of the storm. She can't tell if it is a man or woman because it is essentially a part of the chaos; dark blue winds violently spin in circles to help maintain the figure's existence, though it does not stay for long. It only says one thing to Cathy before disappearing back into the tornado.

"You can't hide from me."

The tornado opens up and divides into the space above her. It fills in the blank gaps of what once was Cathy's sky and field, and Cathy feels like she's drowning in shades of blue. She squeezes her eyes shut and finally finds the strength to run. She doesn't know why she's running, or where—she just runs as hard as she can until her legs eventually give up because the weight of her body has become unbearable. Bloated with fear and resignation, she collapses. She starts to cry, and she chokes at the sight of her tears staining her fingertips as she touches her cheeks. Even in her dreams, she is still the girl whose tears are ink.

Today, Cathy is in the mood to try to paint a girl with a smile. No one's said anything about her hair or face, and she practically sprints back to her house after school. Her fingers twitch to get their hands on a bottle of her tears. She stole a bottle of cobalt blue ink a few days ago, and she thinks that it will be a perfect blue for a smile. A cobalt blue smile. Just the thought of it makes Cathy grin.

When she doesn't see her mother's car in the driveway, her heart races and she runs up the stairs of her house, slamming her bedroom door shut behind her—except she almost has a heart attack when she looks around. All of her paintings of the blue, unsmiling girls are scattered around the room, some in shredded strips and others crumpled into balls. The various shades of blue decorate her room like an ocean of confetti.

She doesn't have to ask herself who would do this because she already knows who did it. It's the same figure that haunts her dreams. She can feel her bones radiate with a mixture of trepidation and rage. *What will her mother do to her now?* She drops to her knees and frantically tries to put the pieces of her paintings together with trembling hands, only the pieces are too fragmented to make any sense. She reaches for a ball of paper and opens it. She wants to pull her hair out when she's met with the bottom half of an unsmiling girl.

The sound of her door opening shocks her. In her adrenaline-fueled haze, she whips her head around and shudders when she sees the gray smile on her mother's face. The smile makes her mother look warped, and it's so demented and *ugly* that Cathy has to look away. She feels like she's seeing her mother for the first time.

"Did you do this?" Cathy wants to scream, except the question comes out of her mouth like it did not want to leave in the first place, and it is incredulous and raspy and gray like her mother's smile. She's not sure why she asked the question in the first place since she already knows the answer.

"Did you think you could get away with stealing from me?" her mother shrieks, ignoring her question and growing hysteria. "That ink belongs to me—your tears belong to me!"

"How could you just ruin all of my paintings?"

"They were *my* paintings," her mother hisses back. Cathy's never heard her voice sound so venomous and hateful. She reaches to the ground, grabs a fistful of the blue mess, and throws it in her daughter's face. "From this point on, you're not to go near my ink! I've been losing money all this time you've been stealing it, you little thief! Your only job is to create the tears. I never gave you permission to use them."

“They’re *my* tears!” Cathy chokes as she falls to the ground pathetically and picks up a ball of blue scraps. Her throat protests at the feeling of her anger pushing its way up her body, convulsing and pounding against her skull like it wants to break her body. Tears pour out of her eyes like a rainstorm. “*They’re my tears!*”

For a second, she thinks her mother looks like she is going to kick her, and she flinches. Her mother doesn’t say a word as her eyes graze over Cathy’s scrunched up body.

“We’re done here,” she says before storming out of the room.

Cathy’s eyes are burning. Her eyes aren’t just watering, she’s not just crying like she does when she cuts onions; she’s an impenetrable hurricane of blind fury, and the hot tears of ink feel like they will melt the skin off her face. She blinks once, then twice, and then three times. By the time she realizes that it doesn’t matter how many times she closes and opens her eyes because the tears won’t stop spilling, she sees that a wave of dark, midnight blue tears has flooded everywhere, ruining everything. It’s a color that stains her hair, clothes, and bedroom floor and is so gloomy that it looks black. She’s sure the ink will be impossible to remove.

When the tears finally stop, she decides she doesn’t want to cry ever again. She searches for a duffle bag and starts throwing in everything she can find in the sparsely decorated room, carefully trying to avoid stepping on the remnants of her paintings. She can’t stay anymore.

Later that night, she sneaks out of her bedroom window and just walks. She doesn’t know where she’s going—she just needs to leave. She knows there are shelters in the town over for runaway youths, so maybe she will go there. She can try to paint again and make some money off of her paintings. Maybe she can make a living off of painting one day.

She’s not certain of anything, she just knows that after seeing her mother’s smile look so ugly and gray, Cathy has come to accept that she will ever be able to paint smile in cobalt blue.