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My Struggle With Anemia
Sarah Barney

In Ohio, people must be seventeen to give blood, or sixteen with parent consent. The Oak Harbor High School blood drive was on the twenty-second of March, two days after my sixteenth birthday. I signed up for the 8:00am-9:20am time slot, so I could skip Chemistry and Algebra II. I sat through a half hour of lecture from the Physics teacher, Mrs. Swint (“Did you eat lunch? Here, drink this entire water bottle”) and the fifteen-minute questionnaire from the tattooed nurse (“Have you ever had a past partner that had HIV? Have you ever given oral sex?”). I was almost ready for the gurney, but there was one more test: the iron test. The nurse screened the tiny dot of blood on my finger. The minimum requirement for iron levels was a 12.5—mine was an 8.5.

“Girl, you need to start taking iron pills.” The nurse shook her head.

I couldn’t donate, but I did get a free cookie, a Mickey Mouse Band-Aid, and I skipped Chemistry and most of Algebra II.

Now I have fully developed into my fear of needles, and am thankful for my anemia, so I don’t have to give blood. My friend, Grace, who is a big advocate for helping humans, though she always shops at Urban Outfitters and H&M, attempts to patronize me into giving blood.

“It saves lives,” she says, “What else do you need to know?”

But just the thought of lying on those deep red gurneys and watching my blood leave my veins makes me lightheaded.

I sigh, hang my head and say, “I can’t, I’m iron deficient.”

Ironically, in order to get a special prescription for iron supplements (over-the-counter pills weren’t satisfactory for my 8.5 level of iron), I had to get blood drawn. I went in for the annual physical with my doctor, Brian. At that time, my bicep had been developing this particularly nasty bruise: deep blue and purple in the middle with yellowish green on the outside in a shape resembling a broken egg. Brian poked it.

“Do you bruise easily?”

The first time I was pantless in front of my boyfriend, his face scrunched up. I reached for my jeans.

“Fuck. Are you okay?” Jacob was referring to the collage of bruises on my legs.

“I’m anemic.”

He spent the next half hour counting my bruises.

“Yes, I do.”

“Do your nails chip easily?”

“Fairly, but I started taking those hair and nail vitamins.”

“Do you crave ice?”

Instead of wanting a bedtime snack of Oreos or chocolate chips, I wanted ice—crushed ice. I craved ice for whole meals. Sometimes, I added water to make it melt a little and easier to chew. Other times, I wanted it just the way it was. The best part of eating crushed ice was when the tiny pieces formed together like a slushy.

“Not so much anymore.”

“Are you tired all the time?”

Every day at two in the afternoon, I fall asleep. This is quite unfortunate on Tuesdays and Thursdays when I have Human Rights, Indigenous Rights, and Environmental Rights, which is even longer than the title suggests. I know it’s coming when Dr. Cort’s constant orange button up shirt and pink, blue, and purple tie becomes dull and swirled. Doodling the decaying Black-Eyed Susan’s outside can’t even keep me awake.

“Pretty much.”

“Are you cold all the time?”

“Cold is just a mindset,” my friend, Coby, said to me one day when he saw me wearing gloves in class.

“But I have low iron.”

“Breathing can solve anything.”

And maybe that’s true, but it certainly doesn’t help when my feet are so cold that I wear three pairs of socks.

“All the time.”

“It sounds like you’re lacking iron.”

I tried to tell Brian that I knew I was iron deficient because I couldn’t give blood two years ago. He wasn’t content with this answer, so he called the nearby hospital and made me an appointment to get blood work done. The hospital is named Magruder but nicknamed McMurder. I was extremely nervous. But everything went smoothly, and I left the hospital with a green apple Blow Pop.

The results came about a week later. McMurder informed me that I was indeed anemic and gave me a prescription for iron supplements.

I quickly learned that taking an iron supplement every day isn’t easy. Remembrance is not a strong point of mine, and in order to take the pill, I have to remember, so already I’m at a disadvantage. It is also quite crucial to take the supplement with orange juice. The acidity helps the body absorb the iron. If I don’t take it with orange juice, the possible side effects are heartburn, nausea, diarrhea, constipation, and cramps. I would rather not take it without orange juice. The problem is, I’m a college student. I don’t have orange juice, nor do I have a mini fridge in my dorm, and the orange juice in the dining hall makes me gag.

Frequently, I complain to Jacob about being cold or tired, or most likely both, and he’ll say, “Well did you take your iron pill today?”

“No.”

“Then shut up.”