

"Little Blue Veins"
Holly Hansen

The grit is melding to the surface of my body and slowly finding its way in. The places where I licked my lips to keep them moist are now encrusted with the dirt that continually blows in my face. It pokes at me with its sharp fingers, like an impatient child. The air seems tight. And I take great, sucking breaths at a feeble attempt for relief. But there isn't any relief. The arid heat draws out every drop of moisture in my skin and casts me aside with nothing in return.

I've been walking toward the same backdrop for hours. I'm constantly moving, but what I'm moving toward doesn't get any closer; just a dull, hazy sky, thick with dust. The sun always shines, pricking at my throbbing skin. It doesn't crawl across the sky like the sun at home did. It always shines in the same spot, like the clock hands stuck on the eleven. There are some sparse, leafless trees here and there, half buried in sand. They grow sideways, bent from the repetitive surges of wind. As far as I can tell, that's all there is here, except me. It's like what you'd call a nightmare, only it's real.

I used to come to this place sometimes. It had only been just a vague feeling back then, when I'd do a certain thing or see a certain place. A strange, warm torrent of nostalgia would come over me, and I'd feel as though I'd already done something I'd never done before. I had once tried to explain the feeling to someone, but they had given me a look that told me I had lost my mind. Sometimes I almost believed them.

Gradually, it went from being an impression to being tangible. I could often feel that heavy wind, coursing through my fingers in a way that felt like dipping my hand into a pool of water. And it felt nice. I allowed myself to slip into it—to immerse myself in the feeling completely. I liked it there because I was alone, even though sometimes the gusts got so strong that the dirt stung. I could think more clearly than I'd ever been able to before. I guess I didn't realize that being so alone was a bad thing.

Sometimes I can still picture the cars and the airplanes and the people, moving about in that fast pace I could never seem to keep up with. But every day they seem farther away. Their faces get fuzzy around the edges, and details don't seem so important anymore. Even the people I used to love most don't seem important anymore. I remember how concerned my mother was for me. "Something isn't right with him," I could hear her say as I walked past my parent's bedroom one night. Her voice was soft as always, quivering gently. "He's gotten so... distant, Charles. I don't know what to do." Her words troubled me. I didn't understand. What could be wrong when I was feeling better than I ever had before? I'd felt such an imponderable sadness before. I can remember the kids in school, before I was taken out. They always laughed at me, but I didn't get any of the jokes. They said I was stupid and retarded. I don't know why they said that, because I was getting A's on all my essays. After a while, my grades slipped. But it didn't seem to matter. Grades were such trivial, pointless things, even though people cared so much about them. They cared so much about everything. In this place—my place—nothing mattered but me. And it had felt great.

After a while, they sent me to a man I'd never met before. He asked question after question, and I answered them all as honestly as I could. But I could see in his dark, depthless eyes that he didn't care. He was just doing his job. I overheard him speaking with my mother in a business-like tone. He said the word 'autism' a lot, but I didn't know what it meant. My mom explained that it makes me different from everyone else. But it makes me better than everyone else, too, she assured me. I kept seeing the man every week, and he'd tell me the same thing. When both my mother and I noticed that the meetings weren't helping... that was when everything went out of control.

I let myself fall completely into this place, and now I can't get out. That pool that I'd run my fingers through had snatched my hand before I could pull it out and then tugged me down to the bottom. That's exactly how it feels—it feels like I've drowned somehow, only mentally.

I gasp for breath, risking a mouthful of the particles that flit about around me. I can feel the sand grinding in between my teeth and I find myself wishing more than ever that I could pull myself out of this. It seems as though everything I'd been running from back in that other life is

coming back in full swing. And there's nowhere else to hide.

The soft, silky sand reaches up to me and drags me into its grip. I allow myself fall and curl into fetal position. I close my eyes, wondering if I'll just turn into sand too if I lay here long enough. The thought is more appealing than trekking on towards something I'll never find.

I can feel the pulsing red glow of the sun in the blackness of my eyelids. I open my eyes, thinking that maybe when I do, I'll be staring at the familiar cracks of my bedroom ceiling. Instead I see a hand, outstretched toward me. I blink furiously, and a girl's face comes into focus. She has dark, nearly black eyes that remind me of the man who asked a lot of questions. Only there is a kind of sympathy inside them that I've never seen before. She doesn't say a word. Just stares at me with those eyes.

I take her hand and she pulls me up. "I thought I was alone." The words come out of my mouth in a hoarse voice that's unfamiliar to me.

A very small smile touches her lips. "You're never alone." Her voice brings back memories of the world I'd thought I'd already nearly forgotten. I don't recall ever seeing her face before, but the way she speaks reminds me of something or someone. She reaches for my hand again, and I let her take it. It feels moist and cool against my dry, cracked skin. Maybe it's my imagination, but the wind seems to die down with that touch and I feel like I can finally breathe. Without another word, she begins to walk, her feet making curved indentions into the sand dunes. I follow behind her. I don't know where we could be possibly going. Everything still looks the same. But having someone there beside me keeps me from falling back into the sand hoping to be buried alive.

"Look," she whispers, her voice full of reverent awe. She points toward the sky and when my gaze finds what she is pointing at, I catch my breath. There is an airplane in the endless expanse of blue; a small white interruption on the horizon. On that plane there are people, all going somewhere with their lives, going at that fast pace I always wished I could keep up with. I realize that maybe I could be on that plane, with all those people. Even though I'm different. The thought is both exhilarating and

frightening. I recall the kids from school again. Their words hurt, even though I didn't know what they meant most of the time. But my mother told me I was better than them. And I'm beginning to realize that I am.

Her hand feels nice in mine. So alive and well. I can just barely see the little blue veins on her knuckles and I smile. I look down at my own veins, blue and unprotected. The blood is red on the inside, but appears different on the outside. The children at school told me I was different. My mother told me I was different. The dark-eyed man told me I was different. But when I'm standing next to this strange girl, and I'm looking at the veins in her hands... I'm not different at all.

The wind ripples the fabric of my shirt against my skin and the sand pelts my exposed leg. Her hair flies frantically about her face. The sun claws at my eyes with its uncomfortable, prickly feeling. But I breath it all in. And I can't stop smiling, because I think I know a way out of here now.