

WHAT IT IS LIKE TO LIVE

Alone in the school yard, a blizzard suddenly blows in, and within moments, puts me in its calculated coma. A small circus bear, I paw the air with my red mittens while my lungs cry like feathers. I spin and spin, a top.

My stocking cap, the ones boys like to yank off when they sneak onto the girl's playground, this the wind takes with ease. Snow begins to fall under my skin. I shiver while my brain stem hardens.

The blizzard halts me in the stasis between fight and flight. To be lost in a storm, any storm, is to know that the angels, like pregnant women, dispense with us freely.

The boys, they chase us while our skirts move in a thievish rush of wind. Underneath: *the beginning of all mystery.*

The boys, of course, get caught. Sister Claret, who has no niggling tenderness toward any of us, says, "You girls have no modesty. I can even see your Kotex."

Our punishment is to come to school that Saturday to scrub the school's corridor with a toothbrush. Down on our hands and knees, each tick-tack-toe tile is beige, boring as God.

I scrub and scrub while glancing into a nearby classroom where I see myself ferrying down aisles, like a small Venetian, past desks long bolted to the floor, gondolas in deep canals, in order to brush the chalk dust from the good sister's veils while the globe atop her desk, needled by its axis, spins and spins its little world.

Every morning, we girls kneel to show her our skirts are long enough. A yardstick is used to measure the length from floor to knee.

While kneeling, I long to step inside Sister Claret's confessional, to watch her undress, tissue falling from her sleeves, her breasts clear, tiny as raindrops. I watch her wipe those breasts away, her hands, small dark erasers.

The day of the blizzard, I walk home after school. Still snowing, the road appears, disappears, caked by briskets of snow. Lonely as an orphan, my tenuous being belongs only to itself while the voice of the storm tries to erase me the way Sister Claret erases her own breasts.

When I walk into the house, a bottle tears through the air, shatters when I grab it with my hand. It splits a vein, turns my finger purple.

I can't even make a fist. I use the other hand to indicate *I'm okay*. How unwise I am, how polite in a crisis.

Mom's giddy, the way people are when their lives go up in smoke. Her eyes, drawn into tiny brown sacks, gleam—the alcohol on her smells like snow and her meanness, it's nebulous as gas or dust.

“Your father,” she says. In that instant, she has pinned the tail on the donkey. “He lost the job again.”

When a boom comes from the wood stove, *red roar, blue applause*, I stand, clutch my hand. With a Ferris wheel smile on my face, I see him, fingering his pant zipper, like a snake's tongue. *Up, down*, it goes. The sound, it rips stitches.

She harrows me, “Go to your room,” she says, as if her voice could penetrate my private parts, which are many—my teeth, my hair, my tears, which are dirty as a sock, but I just stand there, staring at my father's head, which is bald as a bulb of garlic.

“Do as I say, Patty” she goes on, “or else.”

I go halfway up the steep stairs, squat. My parents look like clay figures dipped in oil paint. I watch Mom's hand go up, make the fist mine can't.

When it comes down upon my father, I remember the Playhouse. Down in the woods, it's made out of ticky, tacky. Where I had tea parties with my Patty Play Pal.

“Lift your little finger,” I said as I held the cup, which was wreathed in Banded Peacock butterflies, “just like this.”

When she didn't answer, I wanted to slap her, but she was pretty, much too pretty. She was also bigger than me.

That's when I heard snapping sounds—quick, neat, like a turtle's mouth. “Patty,” came a voice, “oh my little Patty Melt, guess who's here?”

I didn't answer. Instead, I ducked behind my doll, making her my human shield. Peeking out, I glimpsed a hunter's hat. Bright orange, a boiling sky.

“Patty,” came the voice again, “Come out, come out, from wherever you are.”

Sickly sweet, that voice made my stomach turn, like a cherry cough drop.

It was Dad. In his Hush Puppy slippers with the backs broken down. Into the Playhouse he came, fast as a gash.

There was no one to make him reasonable as he ripped the Patty Play Pal from my grip. No one to make him reasonable, as he got out the razor and cut the hair off her head.

No one, as he said, “You’re next,” while holding the razor to her throat.

I could hear Mom saying, “Everyday is like this,” just as Patty’s head hit the floor, dull as a door with a hole punched through it. It rolled, the way heads do.

Holy dum-dum, silly ottie ay. This is what happens, *Holy dum-dum, rum-dee-dum.* To people like me, *silly ottie ay ae.*

The sound of his Hush Puppies. *Silly ottie ay,* like squishy seaweed, *Holy dum-dum, rum-dee-dum.*

Big as a block, I cradled that head—it couldn’t talk, couldn’t walk, that head, which like a ball with no bounce, rolled away, strolled away, as it stayed dead, played dead.

While I walked back up to the house, I wanted my girlhood to circle me, like a coat, but my mouth, rotted and anonymous, felt thicketed in sludge. It opened, shut, burned.

Smelling brittle, I walked into the house, right past Dad who was polishing the shoes. White and eyeless, the clock ticked. Had someone wound it with a knife?

“Soybeans,” he said, “the future is in soybeans.” His face, this was the color of my old sandbox.

I went into my room, closed the door, got into bed where the streetlight looked like the backbone of a dead tree, its green lamp blazing, a neon fig.

While my brain split, a nesting doll, I wondered: had my father stolen my screams? Would I wear what he did to me, like gills, or a new way to breathe, sharp as a flatiron? Aren’t minds like family and isn’t dying one of the exits it can take?

Alone, frightened, I crept down the hallway into my parent's room where they lay on the bed, smelling like the fungi on ingrown toenails. As I walked over to their bureau, house flies brained them.

Inside its drawers: the smell of pine; of lavender. Inside the lavender: nests of stuffing. Inside that: my mother's nylons, a dot of semen, violent longing.

Inside that—a roach nibbling through silk, the sound of it, dust on a bat's wing.

Because death is utterly banal, like an arm pulled through a sleeve, I wanted to be against it.

Besides, I had things to do, like climb into bed with my parents where the ceiling leaked yellow light, like a slit carton of milk. Because they curled, a question mark, I wanted to knock their heads together, a head-on collision.

Instead, I padded down the hallway, out onto the cobblestones, walked away.

Because I walked away, there's no before or after, no faith in, no walls, no shelves, no end to where I live in an apartment, dark as porn, alongside a cripple named Lloyd and an imbecile named Elmer in rooms that enclose me, a headless note.

In the house on Catlyn Avenue, the dark evergreen days turn and turn. The two men, they live upstairs. Elmer is next door to Lloyd. In a room that's soiled newspaper.

He has pictures of naked ladies. Wears sunglasses on Saturdays. Works as a dishwasher. Each plate a slice of moon. Each glass hot and ready for his cock. He likes my legs. Leaves me notes in the mailbox alongside penny candy, as I once did for my mother.

Lloyd sits in his green chair all night long. Tells of his broken body to a TV that blasts the news about a headless body in a topless bar. His face is as soft as my inner thighs, but the rest of him is a tarnished medal.

One night, I sit at my desk, grab one of my father's stubby red pencils. I write Elmer and Lloyd a letter in the pitch dark, imitating a blind child whom I had watched write her name on the chalkboard. Each shaky line leads to another until the words are more like pictures which resemble the attitudes of the sainted sacred.

This work doesn't last long because the cold comes in, a poker chip. I crawl into bed, pull the licorice black bedspread up to my chin. I fluff my lozenge-hard pillow and lay my hair on it, as though it were a dancer's fan.

The street lamp blooms in my bedroom. I listen to the *tap, tap, tap* of Lloyd's wooden leg thumping down the stairs where wallpaper, dimmed by old florals, peels off. His leg is a twisted cask, a complicated bramble. It holds him hostage.

There's a knock on my door. I get up. Wearing my mother's flesh-colored nightgown, I open it.

It's Triplett, not Lloyd.

"Hi," I say. My head is down. I'm afraid to kiss him.

"Can I come in?" he asks. His hair falls in long auburn waves. His face, white as a scare tactic, has blue, blue eyes. Forget-me-nots. Cornflowers. Like my Patty Play, he's too pretty, way too pretty.

"Of course," I whisper, then take his hand, lead him to my bed.

I am nineteen. My body is a dream, is the myth surrounding Catlyn Avenue. I pull my nightgown over my head. It leaves my hair a desirable mess.

"Oh," he says, as he kisses me. I unzip his white Chinos. The sound of it is skin pulled off a snake.

Triplett just stands there, naked, a younger, paler version of my father. Because he wants me, I let him. When the condom, soft as a mouse, breaks, the cartography of longing pulses onto our thighs. I wipe it away, as Sister Claret did her breasts.

And then, he's gone. His vanishing is an abyss, one in which an infant screams. And screams and screams and screams.

In the yard, the landlord's dog is perpetually leashed. The dog turns manic circles, is a goldfish in a dime store bowl. I go outside, walk. The landlord's shape fills his window like a shadow self, then drops from sight.

I walk, barefoot in the melting snow, as though it were my genius to do so. I'm wearing my only dress. Blue birds weep in its torn sleeves.

I walk, hold each breast in my trembling hands while snow starts to fall again, huge flakes, like voluptuous birds whose color is brilliant as a gang war—and clouds the color of a romantic rose throb quicker than the human heart, throb, flutter, like trash in a puddle.

Flushed, cold, I return to the house on Catlyn Avenue, knock on Elmer's door. When he answers, my hand goes to his face. Cool as a clamshell. With no meat inside, but chubby as a club.

Nights, he clicks a spoon against the silver radiators. The rhythm of heartbreak, of distress, of broken bottles flying through the air, of glass, shattering, a rainbow of glass, like skinned fish, the scales, glistening, like a stripper's pasties.

He steps aside, let's me in. "How about a Coke?" he asks.

"A beer would be better, thanks."

Elmer grabs two from a fridge that looks like a well-fed tomb. When he hands me mine, I remember how my father once courted my mother. Instead of flowers, he brought her a basket full of beer. A bouquet of bottles, sudsy, frothy, like scum on a summer pond.

Frightened, Elmer backs into an overstuffed chair. Doilies are on it, like soiled diapers. The sound of him humphing into the chair, deflates. His jaw, it hangs, jowly, like a clown's.

I walk over, straddle him, hike up my dress. The birds, blue as a nightmare, arc their injured wings.

Sounds fill the room. Kitten whispers, cries like kites slapped against the head. When I kiss Elmer's thrash of a face, his sigh is as lonely as a red cello's string.

The beer bottle. This I smack against the coffee table until its neck snaps, the way a bird's does when a cat nabs it, the way my Patty Play Pal's did when Dad knifed it, the stalk of it, celeriac.

The bottle, brown as a scowl, or a moth's head, this I press against Elmer's flabby neck, a low tech crown of thorns. With it, I sketch a zigzag of lines.

I'm about to cut: to score a single, sharp-edged pattern; but Elmer's fixed hysteria is rendered obsolete when little Lloyd rushes in.

Instead of batting the bottle out of my hand, Lloyd bats at the tinsel streamers on the electric fan, then drops his crutch. Looking obscenely green, obscenely jewel-toned, obscenely neck-like, he somehow possesses both grandeur and decadency as he begins to dance.

Like a space invader in an arcane video game, Lloyd, hapless and demented, flaps around the room with spittle on his lips. His fingers wilt, like vegetables in a drawer and the look in his eyes, his thousand, groping green eyes, as he step-drag, step-drag, this is the worst of all, lacerating and unforgivable.

Poor eyes. Poor eyes that see me weeping, the beer bottle now rolling on the floor, like the grossest of tumors and Elmer's lap, soggy as the Kotex Sister Claret insisted she saw when we girls forgot to cross our legs.

The smell has temperature and space while a rat reveals itself in the corner the way a woman tenses in and out of the light—:

My screams sound like fireworks exploding inside a melon. By then, I'm folded into myself where I have memories like this, memories that tell me, *this is what it is like to live*.