

THE BLIZZARD

I.

You are a very small fox in a very small hole, or a man in a dirty uniform, or a boy who is afraid. Above your soft body, bullets swing through gray-green-yellow sky, a sideways rainstorm, and every panting breath is so thick you think the thousand million bits of air moving through your throat could be a crowd of people on a street, pushing and shoving against each other. If you're still on Earth, you can't begin to imagine Hell, except that it might feel an awful lot like this August.

On Christmas when you were ten, there was a blizzard. It had come in on the twenty-third and hadn't left; the snow kept coming down in sheets and sheets, a silent downpour over the city. If you were older you might have been concerned about the dangers of it, about if people would die, but you were only ten, and the only people who ever died were your mother and Jesus, neither of whom had anything to do with the snow. It kept snowing regardless of whether you liked it or not, but you did like it. You liked that it didn't stop.

You are thinking of the blizzard, now, because you are praying for it. You are panting and pretending to fire your gun and sweating and the whole time you're wanting just an inch of snow. Something cold, something that makes bodies fall quieter, something turning the night indigo blue instead of black. You are, unspeakably, praying to be home for Christmas, and if you can't have that, then you'd at least like a silent night.

When you were fifteen you were a poet, an awfully terrible one, and there was a boy called Samuel that you loved how your father loved your mother— in other words, until it killed the both of you. He lived down the block. And at night, every night you could, when you told your brother Jesse you were going out, you held him in his bed and you loved him. You loved him like a girl ought to. And when he died, you wanted to go upstairs with him. You wanted to hold him in Heaven, to wrap your angel bodies up in clouds like old blankets, until Jesse told you he wasn't there. You didn't believe him, though. Jesse didn't know your boy was beautiful and so all the stories, all the idioms about beauty, all of them were about him. If he wasn't in Heaven, then nobody was, 'cause it wouldn't be Heaven. But, then again, you were only sixteen, and you didn't tell Jesse that. You didn't tell anybody

that, not your father or your sister or your notebook or God. You might have gotten better at poetry, had you ever learned how to tell the pages the truth, but in the meantime, you just tell Samuel the truth. Every night you'll tell him what otherwise could have been the greatest poem anyone's ever seen.

You don't know why you're thinking about him now. Maybe the blizzard reminded you of him, not that you needed to be reminded, not really. Maybe the thought came because he was the first dead boy you ever saw, maybe because you know you will be seeing him soon. Maybe you'll die like him, of fever that feels so hot your stomach boils. It's easy to die of sickness. But then again, just as possible you'll be shot or torn apart or any number of ways.

Meanwhile, ten thousand boys are sweating out of unwrinkled dirt-covered skin and decreasing in number, ten thousand foxes you know are going to die. You want to write a poem and can't, so you tell it to him, whispering a kind of a prayer but to him instead of Him, and it feels more like telling him a secret, or like wanting, which is the same thing. Everyone wants something, of course, but you want worse and more terribly than anybody else. You want a dead boy, and you want to tell everyone you wanted him. You want to tell him how you wanted him. You want to dig up his body just to tell him that, to drag him down from Heaven just to tell him to his beautiful face how you don't care if it's better for him up there, you want him down here in the sweltering heat and the earth-shaking noise.

The wind howls. Someone screams nearby. You breathe in.

You also want to see your brother again. You want Jesse not to die the way you will. And you want grace for your father— it is a bad time to have sons, and you want that he'll still have one by the time it's all over. You wonder briefly if Jesse's dead, and the news just hasn't reached you yet, but that's unlikely— he has always been better at fighting than you are. You kneel wondering how long it will take him or your father to find out, after you die.

That's what one of the other boys, Henry, told you, when they were sending you and him out, that you were going to die. You knew that he was right in that, too. You knew you would die like this, just as you knew that the sun would set in the west. You knew it like fact: you were eighteen, and tomorrow was a Sunday, and you were going to die.

What Henry said next was *so you might as well go out fighting*, though, and you found that clause harder to believe. He must have, too, because he's sitting next to you, down here, and he's howling and shaking like a thousand running-away footsteps he wants to take, like a dog afraid of

storms. He doesn't want to die fighting, not really. And there's the other thing, speaking of wanting— you don't want this. You don't want to die, not even for your country, not even for a good reason, not even for all the best, most moral reasons in the world. It's going to happen soon, you can feel it, it comes, but you want snowfall, and you want Christmas, and quiet, for once, and to sleep until the late-winter sun wakes you up. You want to climb a tree on the first warm day of the season. You know you'll die, but you don't want to die pretending to kill somebody one more time.

You wonder what Henry wants, desertion or peace or love or his nineteenth birthday. Next time he goes up to fake firing, he takes a bullet straight through his chest, falls backward, and goes to Heaven. He screams. His head hits the dirt after his shoulders do. It's not the second dead boy you've ever seen, but it'll be the last, you know it, absolutely. You aren't sure if you believe in prayer, all things considered, but, then again, it doesn't really matter, because all this yelling coalesces into one lesson, one lecture: there are no atheists in foxholes, and no theists there either. There is no ceremony, no handsome martyr here laid down, no prayer material but no lack of asking for it. Dirt makes no distinction between the strong and the weak, the poets and the wrestlers, the boys beat bloody in the schoolyards and the boys walking home with bruised knuckles. There are only the dead and the things they wanted, and the dirt under your fingernails.

Henry dies without saying a word, but he looks at you and you look at him for a moment or two, even three, right in the eyes, before they go blank, and then you are afraid, too, because you're going to die just like this, just like Henry. It's going to hurt.

The sky sounds like it cracks in half, then, and you go up to fake-fire and you're struck in your cheek and your eye with what must be lightning, or fire, or hot twisting metal. Here's when it happens, you're going to die. It comes. Is this how Samuel felt, hot and sick and bile rising in his throat? Thoughts escape you. You sweat. You open your mouth to scream and the movement in the forty-three muscles of your face against the metal shreds flesh. It's burning. When you were very, very small, you tripped into a candle, burnt your leg. This is not like that, but it is. You collapse, your knees hit the wet dirt, left and then right. There are no poems you want to write about this.

And then, not by miracle or prayer or justice or chance, but by a boy you won't ever know, you don't die. Most of your body makes it out of the hole, out of the horizontal-rain line-of-fire. They take you and put you in a

bed and a man who smells like bitter soap stitches your face up with pieces from your arm. You will have to lie there for seven hundred years before you're all fixed. The heat outside will die down, autumn will come, they say, before you are a man once again. You have your doubts.

II.

Through Christmas Eve, it kept on coming down, you remember. That night your father taught you why the snow falls the way it does, and you ran your small hands down the foggy glass, drawing pictures in the white. Afterwards, he told you all the stories again, or he tried to. He was still learning, then, how to tell them as good as your mother, who was in Heaven. He always got the timing wrong, skipped straight to the ending without telling you how the sky looked over Bethlehem. But who could blame him? The details are hard to remember.

After the story was done, you got into bed all on your own. The wool scratched against you when you pulled it up to your cheeks, but you did it anyways. The snow coming down gently and quickly outside dampened any noise that could've come in from outside, but the blue light through the window made it hard to fall asleep, so you just lay there knowing you'd go eventually. You wondered if the snow scratches like wool on the rooftops, but you knew better. It would pile up and up over the streets and balconies and everything, soft on top and thicker and thicker the further down you go. You remembered when you were smaller and your brother, when he was ten, hit you up close with a snow-ball made of the further-down ice, the kind that'd give you a bruise on your arm for a week or two. Jesse laughed and you frowned and he laughed some more and so you laughed back. You weren't sure, lying there in the third winter since, if you'd hit him like he did you, if you were ten when he was seven. But maybe you would.

As if you'd brought him upstairs for bed just by thinking of him when he was your age, the bedroom door creaked open and Jesse slipped in. You kept your eyes closed, faking sleep, but you knew it had been him from the particular sound of his boots on the wood. You listened as he hung his coat and walked across the small room to his bed. The springs whined as he sat down, removed his shoes (which *thunk* on the floor), and paused. You heard him breathe as if about to say something, but it ended almost before it had begun.

Another whine of the bed and creak of floorboards as he got up again. You wondered where he was looking while he just stood for a moment or two, or if he'd just been praying standing up. His shirt rustled and his belt buckle clinked as he changed slowly. You didn't know they existed at the time, and you couldn't see them, but the bruises dotting his chest and ribcage and side he'd later tell you about were still there, probably even still hurting if you pressed them. Jesse'd been getting into fighting. He'd tell you about the wins two years later, and tell you never to make his mistake a year after that. *Fighting like that's for kids, Peter. Get a job or something.* But he'd still been a kid this Christmas, so he'd keep making that mistake for the time being. You heard him put on his pajamas.

The clock tower rang twelve times, you counted. You wondered if the guy ringing it ever overslept. It'd be easy to do in this weather. Your eyelids are drifting from dishonestly closed to pleasantly heavy, the kind of almost-sleep when your thoughts must pack up and go home for the night to their own wool blankets.

You heard the rustle of sheets as Jesse settled down again under his wool blanket, identical to yours, and maybe the tiny ones your thoughts have. He sighed like your father was known to do, like it shook his whole body. You could hear him breathe in through his nose, short and kind of wet.

"Merry Christmas, Peter," he whispered. You listened to him roll over and lie there, but you were asleep before you heard snoring.

In the morning, you did presents. Your brother gave you a knife for Christmas, and that was the last year you saw snow— these things, of course, were unrelated, except for how you predicted both of them.

III.

But autumn comes, to your surprise, and you and your body go home with a gentle heart still weakly beating and one glass eye, slightly off color from your real one. Your father helps you get an apartment. You haven't talked to your neighbors yet, but you see them, sometimes. In the park, husband and wife with two children happy to see their father's seemingly recent, seemingly unharmed return. You can tell it's recent, but before yours, because his hair's grown out. A respectable length, of course, but the kind of length his kids could reach and hold onto if he lifted them.

In the evening, the gold light spills out their windows so much you can see it from your own window, as if just the light on its own could warm up the November-to-December chill beginning to set in. Not enough to take off a sweater, or anything, but warm enough not to shiver. It'll be a warm drink in blankets sort of season, for them. The kids'll run outside in the park down the block and watch their breath 'til Dad comes home, when they'll take their mittens and scarves off and run back to the kitchen, rosy faces still tingling. Golden light out the windows turns off when they're tucked in, but while it still flows from the home, you drink it up like a thief. You wish you could bottle it up just to take more, to drink it like a tonic at all hours, after the children have gone to sleep, but it's only light. You stick to your prescribed doses.

Instead, in the night, in your darkest coat and hat pulled low, you head deeper into the city. Your shoes clack-clack off the concrete; your healing skin glints in the streetlight. The wind winds through the city in a maze. It can't get you when those buildings wall you off from any of it, though.

The place you're headed is underground, like it's making a bad joke about Hell and its patrons. The floorboards creak when you enter like an outlaw, a few heads turning your direction. You keep your hat low, but the people who know you know you all the same. You smile with the half your face that works as it's supposed to as you sit down at the bar.

You order a drink or several. You watch the room, make predictions. The woman onstage sings of starting over somewhere different, somewhere new. She's going to make it there, but it's going to hurt. You suppose that's what everybody here would like to do, to start over. Some look to be trying here, men dancing close to other men, dressed illegally, graceful shining in the dim light.

A man sits down next to you. This is always how it goes, sitting down next to you, or making eye contact, exchanging glances. This time the man is older by a few years, dark-haired, slim. You can't tell in here, but his eyes are blue, and his watch is expensive. When you're done, he'll go home to his wife, you can tell. You will never learn his name.

He buys you a drink, and you call him beautiful, because he is, and because in response, he asks you to leave with him, and you do. You go separately to your building, and he waits to go in until a long time after you enter. You pull him into your bed and he's even more beautiful here, not that you would say that now. You sweat and move and writhe until his and your needs are satisfied, and then he leaves with a simple *goodnight* in your

bedroom doorframe. He does not kiss you, and you know, just know, that it's because he's afraid.

IV.

Two years before you even leave for war, you're still holding Samuel. You climbed up his fire escape and, when he opened up his window, in you went. The air stood still, like any wind could have broken whatever spell both of you were under, staring at each other, him in his pajamas and you in your darkest coat in the silver moonlight.

Samuel steps closer. You are still discovering what you can do in secret, in his room when the city sleeps. Even before you yourself are in the war, you are a soldier in uniform, playing war, albeit an awful one who can't even follow orders. But in his room—desertion. There is no pretending about battles, no running around hiding behind trees. You are replaced, somehow, by the boy you could have been, the infant, soft-handed. You can predict nothing. You step towards Samuel.

He smiles, his tanned skin crinkling in the corners of his mouth. If not for the vow of near-silence that falls when you enter the room, you could have said poems just about that.

“Hey,” he says, half-whispering, grinning.

You smile, and your hand, pale and tender, finds his. You close the distance between you and him, kissing him gently, and all the fear and morbid projections in the world slip out through the window. You are here, and he loves you. His hand rests steady on the small of your back, as if to remind you that he's got it. You squeeze his hand tighter.

Your head falls to his shoulder, your mouth on his neck, laughing just a bit. He takes off your coat, a burgeoning gentleman, and steps back. Samuel always folds it like you're supposed to, neatly and unwrinkled. He places it on his bed, and returns to you.

One of his hands traces down the back of your arm, the feeling light as snow and standing your hair on edge just the same way. You forget how to breathe without thinking about it. He smiles, watching your reaction as always. Every meeting seems to be a series of tests between the two of you, various inputs from either party, innumerable variables on any given night, and various reactions, various outputs. New information learned, new hypotheses formed, to be tested later. Samuel's the primary mind behind this

kind of system. He wants to be a chemist when he's older, and he's been reading all the books on it.

But tonight, Samuel tests his fingertip on the back of your arm, and you find out what happens when you put your hand on his hip when you kiss. It becomes too many variables for him to keep track of, and you learn you like getting him out of his head. You have a new hypothesis, though: when he kisses you, he hums just slightly, sometimes. You'll have to try again to check, though, because you kept forgetting to pay attention to anything except for feeling.

Eventually, you end up as you always do, lying in the bed together. You don't do anything, you just hold him, and you talk, partially to avoid falling asleep, and mostly because Samuel says he likes the sound of your voice, and the way you line up words one after another in what seems like the order they were invented just to be in. You tell him all the stories you've ever heard, every building you pass on the walk to his fire escape, the shapes of all the clouds you've ever seen, everything you remember about your mother, everything you miss, everything you love, until it's far past midnight, and the moon doesn't shine through that window anymore.

"Time to go, I suppose," you say. You sit up.

"Wish you didn't have to." He holds your hand, and sits up next to you.

"I know."

"Dad keeps asking if I've got a girl yet."

"Do you?"

"Come on, Peter," he laughs quietly. "I wouldn't."

"You could. That girl next door seems," you trail off, looking for a word, "nice." Hell of a poet, alright.

Samuel shakes his head, grinning, then leans in to kiss you again quickly. "You're my girl, Peter," he whispers, playing. "Prettier than Nancy, too." He stands up, lifts up the hand that's holding yours to pull you up standing and spin you around like a ballroom dancer. You whisper-laugh. He kisses you again.

"You're my girl, too, then, you know." You laugh— oh, you forget where you are, you are foolish, Peter, foolish. You forget, for just a second, that you're in his bedroom, and you laugh and forget to whisper. Samuel stands straight up. A dog barks outside, in one instant, the fear's shot back through the open window. His eyes are wide and scared, and he turns towards the door. Somewhere, a floorboard creaks, deafening. The sound strikes you

through the chest. Everything collapses in on itself, the spell of silence breaks. You grab your coat from the bed, run to the open window, the fire escape, you tear your knee open on the metal, but you get out, get down to the street. You want to look back and you never do, but you hear Samuel shut the window behind you.

It's only correlation, but the next week, Samuel gets sick.

V.

It hasn't snowed since you got back, not like you'd hoped. It's a dry Christmastime, except for the sweat in your bed and the drinks at the spots you don't say you've been going to. Some days and nearly all nights, you think you did die. No, that's not right. You think that if it snowed, and if you closed your eyes, you would think you did die and go to Heaven. But all the snow's stuck in the clouds, in Heaven, so it doesn't snow here. You wonder sometimes when your itching prediction will be right.

It's odd. You didn't have to shave before you left— you were always growing up late. Now you do, every day. It's a part of your routine. You wake up, for the seventh time, this time at the correct time. Sometimes there is a man-shaped indentation in the bedsheets next to you, and sometimes it's just your own sweat. You go to the toilet, and you shave half your face, and you stare at yourself in the mirror. At the dent in the side of your face, where the raised skin curves inward, up your cheek, over what remains of your nose. You breathe, every day somehow deeper than you thought you could, your lungs shaking, and you put in your eye.

You're doing Christmas with your father and your brother and his new wife this year. Charlotte's beautiful and hates her husband, not that it's your business. She makes a wonderful meal, roasted duck and carrots and wine, and you sit with her and your brother and your father in their home that is tidier than yours. She's used the nice dishes, and the silver, and it's almost so beautiful you couldn't even be resentful about how lovely it all is.

"Got your eye on any girls, Peter?" She asks. She's good at this, at making talk that doesn't matter, and you appreciate the effort, mostly because it's better than anything anybody else wants to talk about.

"No, not really," you say, because as much as you appreciate Charlotte trying, you're a terrible liar, and you hate to invite questions. This is also easier to say than before the war, because now you've got an acceptable

reason that nobody wants to ask about. Really the only gift of having a hole in your face. You grimace, just to imply the point further, because her wording really was quite unfortunate, and then you feel guilty, because now everyone's silent and Charlotte probably thinks she's insulted you.

Your father coughs and changes the subject. You aren't listening. You know Charlotte can tell, because you know she's not listening, either.

You look outside the window behind her, because you think if you look away and look back it might start snowing. It occurs to you, sometimes, that maybe it is snowing, secretly, but you can't see it out of your dead eye. Maybe you got stuck in summer forever. You make eye contact with Charlotte, then, and you both make all the motions of listening to your brother. She talks to you in some silent, motionless way, like she knows that you know you can hear her without speaking. You know she knows you, knows the address of the bar from the dust on your coat.

You take a drink of the wine, and you don't like it very much. It spills slightly out of the corner of your misshapen mouth, and your father glances at you guilty again. You wonder if he's praying for you. You drink the rest of your glass.

Your brother's slurring his speech by now. It's the same sway, the same tilted voice as when you were fourteen. He leans towards you.

"Bet you glad you got hit in the face, Peter," he says, half-grinning. "You got to get out of there no problem."

Your face can only go half red with shame. All of a sudden you are seven years old again, and you want God to strike down your brother dead. You feel hot. You open your mouth and have no response, as always. Why do younger brothers always have to be clever? You make the mistake of looking up and meeting your father in the eyes, and he's waiting.

Jesse shoves your shoulder, teasing. You flinch, and he laughs. Your father breathes out, shakes his head. You know what he's thinking in only that breath: you shouldn't need him like this anymore. Smaller children ought to develop enough wit or spirit to balance the field; it's only natural.

"Lay off him, Jesse," he says, tired. You say nothing, and your face remains half-red. Jesse leans back in his chair, bored. Even Charlotte looks at you with pity, and your shoulder begins, easily, to bruise again.

VI.

When you leave Jesse's, you know Charlotte knows where you're going. Your darkest coat, your nicest shoes on the concrete in the silver moonlight. Hell is emptier on Christmas, but they've decorated just a bit, tinsel on the stage and around the bar. Your shoulder hurts, and there's still wine on the front of your shirt like blood.

Why won't it snow? You feel dizzy, nauseous, hot. You keep thinking today will be the day you're a man, but something new reminds you you're still a child and a crier and a girl, no cleverness or strength or ambition. You miss your mother. You hate that you miss her like nobody else seems to. You miss her terribly. You know you didn't know her, not really, but you can tell from the outline, the things she must have said from the things your father is bad at saying, the things she must have loved from the things your brother doesn't do anymore. In your understanding, she hands you a notebook and a pen. She kisses your head. When you come home late at night, a deep gash in your knee, she cleans and bandages it without question. She says *I love you* no less than fourteen times a day, and she loves the summertime, and she plays the piano you found in your attic. Sometimes, when the air is just right and your prediction itches particularly strongly, you even dare to wonder how she might have felt if you died before she did.

You drink, let it spill out the side of your mouth again. Where's that blizzard when you want it? You hope today is your day. You can't keep wondering when you'll die, you can't keep predicting it when it keeps not coming.

But you can rest your head on the wood of the bar for just a moment, just like that. It's alright. The wood is cool and soft against your forehead. You close your eyes. Cry, Peter, like glass shattering, like a snowstorm, burning like wool against skin. Feel it bubble up through your throat, heaving, falling. Cry, sob, quietly as you can, until somebody comes to your side. You let him put his hand on your shoulder, pull you into his chest.

After seven hundred more years in his arms, you look at him, the stranger. His face is soft, worn, old. You know he knows you, more than anybody, somehow. He's missing his left arm, and you wonder where it lies, and you know he doesn't remember.

"I'm going to die," you whisper.

"Maybe," he says.

“I want to.” You wipe your nose, sniffing. “I should’ve gone already.”

He smiles just a bit, gently. “Maybe you should’ve.”

You look past him, to the door. Somebody enters, face hidden, hat low. They shake something white off their dark boots.

“You gotta go, Peter.”

Snow falls. You sell your coat, and your furniture, and your books, and your uniform. You make good money on it, on everything. *Come on, Peter.* The city spins and it makes your ears ring and everything you hear seems to tell you the same words the stranger did, *go, Peter.* Buy a suitcase and pack it. Pack light, but be smart, keep your knife in your pocket, keep your boots. Buy a pen. Buy a train ticket. Buy a notebook. The snow is coming harder now. Put on your scarf, your hat, your new wool coat. Don’t look back to your apartment, don’t look at your neighbors’ windows, leave after those kids have gone to sleep. Hear the train, now, the mourners’ morning bells. Don’t tell your father, or Jesse, or even Charlotte, although Charlotte knows. Step onto the train. See the snow in the windows, fogging up. Breathe, be prepared: Peter’s going to die, and you’re going to go somewhere else.