

“The Gifted Child”

Mother’s Glove

I.

Mother’s hand held green, the quilted glove;
mother’s eyes met child’s eyes’ glint,
saw twisted lip, the infant’s wit (that little shit).
“Best to quell such wit, lest they say I left
unchecked that glint, that smirk (that little shit).”

Whip, snap, the wrist moved quick,
green glove slapped smart ‘cross childish face.
A pause.
And then a wail.

“Such a slap should cause no quail. A quilted glove
could not assail, should not elicit such a mournful wail.
No child could be so tender or so frail to wail
from just one slap from mother’s quilted glove,” thought she.
Such tears demanded restitution, proclaimed a tender
constitution, but she could not submit to dissolution
at the resolution of a child: A resolution born of pride.
“For pride this was.” The tears were sheer manipulation,
and she would not submit to the machinations of a child.

He would need to know such pain meant nothing. Some
kids knew pain, knew shame, and blame and absolute humiliation,
were beaten for absolutely no transgression.
He would need to know about the woman
who shoved her daughter in the washer
for peeing in her pants. These were monsters.
She was no monster. He was loved and cared for.
There was nothing for him to be scared for.
This curtailing of his pride was for his good.

But that child’s eyes’ glint nonetheless had scared her;
even though he might be cared for, would he ever toe the line?
What sort of monster might she yet unleash upon the world?

II.

“And then she slapped me with a glove,” I said.
“Just came out of nowhere. And she tried to tell
me it didn’t really hurt. That I just felt bad because
I had been punished. But the fucked-up thing is that
I don’t even remember what I was doing. I couldn’t
have been more than four years old. What was the

point, you know?”

We walked along an abandoned parking lot across from the Toledo Zoo, passing a bottle of Yukon Jack that his brother bought us, swapping stories of maternal abuse. Derek had me beat and we both knew it, but for either of us to say so would ruin the moment. Once we drained the bottle, I threw it high and it crashed onto the cracked pavement, exploding into shards of rage.

Back at his house, the one his mother would soon burn to the ground, whether by accident or design we never knew, and all we heard then was that she had passed out drunk while smoking in the house that her ex-husband owned, we opened another bottle of Yukon in our “drinking cave.” It was a wood-paneled annex to the basement, where he kept his drum kit and we’d taped photos ripped from nudie mags along the walls, and even the ceiling: “Breezy’s ultra-beautiful ultra-butt” winked down on me as I mixed Yukon and lime juice in a shot glass.

After Derek’s mother burned down that house, she went under arrest at a Best Western, and the neighbor lady let him move into her basement. While he stayed there, his mom tried to get his car towed and then to get him arrested. She slowly faded in and out of his life, with news emerging every few years. Once she showed up at a community theater to protest a play he was in, claiming he had abused her. Other times we’d hear of time spent in jail or violations of parole. After seventeen years of estrangement at the advice of a therapist, she died of a stroke. When I asked if he were saddened or relieved, overall, he was decidedly more relieved.

But long before any of that happened, I downed another snake bite and, staggering to the bathroom, tripped, and crashed into the drum set, landing just like Kurt Kobain in that one picture. “Breezy” smiled down from behind her asshole, ankles contorted around her head. Off to the left, the only source of light illuminated my shame: a tiny childhood lamp we’d rummaged out of storage, painted white with a waxy yellow shade and a wooden bee that wound up and played “Lullaby and Goodnight.” It used to sit next to my bedstand, and my mother would sing along with it to help me sleep at night.

The Gifted Child

I was good at cursive, took naturally to it,
carefully filling in the letters between the solid, blue lines
with the dotted, red line crossing through the middle.

I loved to learn the next letter in the book,
took delight in the variations:
some letters, such as A or D weren't so different,
but then I came across something like a Q
or even an I and it was like discovering a new species.
for the first time.

A counselor took me aside for special lessons
where I drew pictures of my fish tank
and told little stories about them.
I didn't know why,
but I knew this meant I was different,
meant for special things,
but didn't fully understand
and merely took in stride,
not understanding yet
just what they were doing to me.

Later I picked up the mathematics tables
with ease,
continued to excel at vocabulary,
wrote little stories that the teacher read to the class.

Some of them were tinged with violence
and even a bit of mild profanity,
picked up from sitting around in the gymnasium
while my parents practiced community theater:
my dad played a mad, blind bomber who killed
people who were unkind,
while I walked along the lines of the basketball court,
over and over and over again.

The teacher must have felt obligated
to share my gift with the students.
I'm not so sure they appreciated it.

But I looked down on them as well,
not understanding the ones who couldn't
get the math tables, the vocabulary lessons,

finding them a bit laughable,
even as I couldn't tie my shoes, tell time,
or distinguish left from right.

In the third grade, they put me in the magnet program
for gifted and talented children,
separating me from my best friend Brett,
around whom I felt safe and confident,
not afraid to use my voice,
to the point that I would get in trouble
for speaking too much in class.

In the honor's classes, I sat by myself
in silence.
When the class went round in a circle,
declaring "good day, bad day,"
I always said I wasn't having any kind of day.
When a substitute teacher tried the same game,
the other kids were way ahead of her:
"He always says that," they said,
And they were right.

I won good citizenship awards
for being quiet
and keeping to myself,
something I did not because I valued it,
but because I was afraid to do anything else.

Bible Camp

In afterschool meetings, behind closed doors,
the teachers congregated and lamented:
*Something's wrong with that kid. His father lost his job,
and I've met his mother; what a battle axe!
Oh, and I think he killed the class pet!
He's on a bad path. So sad. Such a waste.
Such a lost opportunity.*

*But, wait! This might help! A summer camp experience
for troubled kids: archery, wallet making,
swimming in the lake, and it's run by good Christian people.
Sign him up! Help him out! Set him on the right path!*

They called me pig nose, for obvious reasons,
and Pollyanna, because I listened dutifully
to the Bible stories, delighted in the puppet shows,
of the Jews saved from Pharaoh, of persecuted, faithful Job,
reluctant Jonah thrown into the whale,
Elijah flying up to Heaven in a chariot of fire,
after making bread from just a bit of oil and flour,
and Abraham, ready to sacrifice his son to the Lord,
but given a reprieve at the last minute.
It was never a question of faith or belief.
I got lost in the stories, as I often do.
They calmed me.

But mostly, I wanted to be left alone. I didn't want
to learn archery, or swim in the lake, or make a damn wallet.
I hid out in the cabin, claimed a stomach ache,
and, curled up in the bunk, read my *Bible* like a good Christian.

I read about Jephthah killing his daughter
to honor his bargain with the Lord,
because she happened to be in the wrong place
at the wrong time; about the Levite who fed
his concubine to the mob so they wouldn't rape his guest,
and then chopped her corpse into 12 pieces –
one to send to each of the 12 tribes of Israel –
to make a point.
I learned about Lot's daughters, seducing their father with wine,
about Onan, struck dead for blowing his wad on the ground,
and Ham, cursed for seeing his drunken, naked father.

A seed was planted in me, and, I thought, a truth revealed,
a truth kept secret by the adults, a truth they didn't want
me to see, a truth they didn't want to see themselves.

Their God was jealous and angry, could be cruel and spiteful,
striking down on a whim the faithful, the good,
the powerless and lost, who did evil things in their turn.
Life didn't always work out for the best,
could, in fact, be brutal, and we might suffer
at the hands of those we wanted most
to deliver us from evil.

But I couldn't always stay in bed. On the last day,
I joined a hayride with the kids who called me pig nose.
And of course, they turned on each other, stole the shoes
of another kid, one who bullied me,
and he cried and cried and cried,
until I found his shoes and gave them to him.
In thanks, he called me pig nose. I could have killed him,
like I killed that mouse.

Look at me! (Don't look at me.)

The class nominated me to go. I had
read them a story – eyes glassy, hands trembling –
about a kid who, prompted by his idiot friend,
and a load of drugs and booze, chops off his
own hand, and cauterizes the stump over a gas
burner before passing out – all as self-retribution
for beating his girlfriend;
it was inspired by Tarantino, Reznor,
and a passage from the Bible
("if thy right hand offends thee...")
overheard during last week's sermon.

"You're scared," one kid observed matter-of-factly.
"Is this really what we want to represent us?" another asked.
Despite this reasonable objection, they did,
along with one other student, the pretty, preppy Art Girl.

The teacher drove us in his pickup,
and Art Girl cracked jokes about smoking cigars and getting drunk
that I only interpreted one way:
"This bitch thinks she's better than me."
The whole way up she nattered on about herself
wanting to live on her own private island someday.

The teacher cracked his own jokes when we drove past a cemetery:
"People are just dying to get in there" –
dark and edgy humor for a dark and edgy kid.
He was a good guy, though,
though I never would have admitted it then;
he got me into English,
when I'd been more of a math and science nerd 'til then.
Other kids told me about the time he read his poems in class,
about his alcoholic son getting pickled on the vine –
he was crucified for being vulnerable in front of teenagers.

I read my story at the workshop.
"Oh my!"
"Well, that's something!"
"You'll be the next Stephen King!"
They didn't get it. I was too deep for them. Whatever.
Art Girl met a boy from another district, and they started dating.
But I didn't leave her sight.
Not entirely.
She still turned to me in future workshops,
an assignment to write something in the style of *Beowulf*,
swapping her silly poem about Elvis Parsley

with mine about a demon that spread a plague.

She was sweet.

I might have charmed her.

Or tried.

“You’d like my friend, Emily”

she told me once.

“You’d make a good couple.”

Emily, who greeted me and Mom and Dad
as *maître de* at a local restaurant.

“I know her,” I said. “She’s in my classes.”

“I thought she was being flirty,” Mom said
in a voice that sounded disapproving.

Later that night,

I listened to The Cars “I’m not the One” on repeat,
imagining myself as rejecting her pre-emptively
to soothe the pain of a desire I felt unable to act upon.

Emily, who played Chava in *Fiddler on the Roof*,
who bewitched me with her dance sequence
in red leotard surrounded by clouds of mist,
so much that I attended both nights of the show.

Emily, who complimented me once on my recital
of a scene from *Dial M for Murder*
as part of an English assignment.

Emily, who shared a locker next to mine,
whom I worked up the nerve up to say “hi” to
once a week or so.

“I could introduce you,” Art Girl said.

It might have been a way into a world I envied
and needlessly despised from a distance.
Instead, I curled up in my sheets
and listened to my angry music,
showing the world
just who was better than whom.

The Will to Evil

Matt and I prepared a duffel bag
with instruments of death:
a screwdriver,
bungee cord,
a hammer...
We knew not what we were doing.
We thought we might kill him,
if we found him
alone that balmy night
walking along the disused tracks
as he was wont to do.
We'd get this nerd,
show everyone
just what we could do.
We drove for hours down country roads,
listening to Styx
and They Might Be Giants,
never once spotting him.
All in all,
it was a pleasant evening.

I often wonder what we would have done
had we seen this person
that I barely knew,
that Matt bore some inexplicable grudge against.
Probably nothing.
Or we might have played the fools,
like the time we tried to vandalize his lawn,
and instead, Matt smashed his own car into a telephone pole.

But the will was there:
the will to malice,
to evil,
to flex our muscles,
to inflict violence
on one lesser than even we.

Four years later,
two teens would shoot up a high school
to great infamy.
The media cast Dylan and Eric
as disgruntled nerds,
losers lashing out at the upper strata
of jocks, cheerleaders, and Christians.
We too saw ourselves as suffering
under such oppression,

related to the rage of the repressed.

But Dylan and Eric weren't such outsiders,
and their targets made less sense
than the narratives implied:
the hapless, the disenfranchised,
the randomly selected.
And there, too, we bore some resemblance.

These days,
we often wonder
what Grace of God
kept us from going there.
The question is as complex
as it is troubling.
Although perhaps the answer is simple:
We lacked conviction.