

Notes from the Squall

The one in the building in front of me practices scream therapy every morning in the shower. The first time it came as a shrill howling, a wailing noise. I was not alarmed, for why should I care? It was unexpected, however, and jarring to be confronted with. As the days went on, then the weeks, I thought it more like a caterwaul. An insecure and vulnerable sound to mark the start of a new day, another noise to join the cacophony of sparrow and starling morning cries.

It was the older one, from the building behind me, that taught me about the noises. On that day the screams began at their usual time. Like every morning, the light of the window from the building in front of me turned on. The shower water began, and then the shrieks. I had been standing, feeling a strange mix of apathy and curiosity, when two from the building behind me stepped outside. Both of them wore thick coats and long scarves. They looked like two squirrels, too stuffed with acorns to move completely freely. The taller one held a ball with one hand and the hand of the shorter one with its other.

As the wailing continued, both faces turned toward me as their eyes searched for the source of the noise. Their eyes looked beyond me and seemed to find the lit window. While the shorter one's eyes were startled, the taller one's were calm.

"Dad, what's going on? Should we call the police?" whimpered the shorter one.

With a visible sigh, the taller one put his hand on the shoulder of the shorter one. "No, no. Our neighbor isn't in any trouble. I've already talked to him about it. Let's go somewhere else to play catch."

The taller one began to walk away from me, away from the screaming building. The shorter one gestured angrily. "What do you mean? He sounds like he's hurt!"

"Listen, it's really nothing. He's just doing something called primal scream therapy."

"What's-"

"He's screaming to make himself feel better about something. He wasn't clear on what it's all about, but what he's doing is remembering a disturbing past experience." The tall one took the shorter one's hand and began to walk away. This time, the shorter one followed. "I looked it up the other day. It's real psychotherapy. The unrestrained screams and hysteria helps express normally repressed anger or frustration-"

The wind picked up and made the leaves rustle. Their conversation became distant and mixed with the symphony of the wind, the birds, the screams.

The squall began when the sun was high. Big white flakes, pristine. Pelting their way to the ground. Some began to gather around my bottom, others iced my arms. Through the powder I noticed the tall one from the building behind me. His arms were laden with white plastic bags, just as how I would soon be laden with white snow. One bag snapped and with a small crash, a plastic milk carton hit the pavement. A loaf of bread plopped into the quickly expanding puddle. My attention drifted as the shorter one came out of the house behind me to help the tall one.

In front of me, the screaming one had just parked his car and emerged with a bag of his own. His was a brown paper bag, the top of a bottle peeking out of it. He kept his head down and disappeared in the building before me.

The clouded sunlight slowly fades to a dark orange glow. Bits of a pink sunset tentatively peek their way through the clouds, but are quickly obstructed as darkness takes over. As nightfall conquers, an army of hail parachutes from the sky. It mixes with snowflakes and coats the world with white. The flakes are silver and they are dark and they are infinitely various, infinitely repeating. They fall obliquely against the lights from the buildings before and behind me.

And then, like an intermission at an orchestra, daylight breaks. A small hint of blue sky emerges. Sunlight leaves a flash of diamonds over the white world. My arms have grown heavy with the snow. It has piled high and covers a fourth of my height. Then like clockwork, the light from the building in front of me turns on. The running shower water begins, and the wailing begins. The orchestra has resumed.

Later, when the sun once again reaches its peak, there is movement behind me. The short one, bundled with an even thicker coat and extra scarf, dashes into the frozen fluff. The snow is so deep that it reaches past his waist. He yells, and his screams remind me of the one from the house in front of me, but they are different. These screams are not full of agony, they are full of glee. They are laughing screams, giddy screams. The short one rolls in the snow, he tosses it into the air, he makes a ball and hits me with it. The vibration pushes some of the snow off my arms and I am thankful for the lessened burden. Still, the weight of snow is heavy on my arms. I do not know how much longer I can hold it.

The shorter one is joined by the taller one. They speak to each other in joyful tones but the quickening wind makes it hard to hear their words. The wind catches wisps of snow and the flakes blow like smoke off nearby bushes and tops of cars. The shorter one throws a ball of

snow at the taller one and then takes off running in my direction. My arms become weaker from the snow even as the short one draws closer. He turns and makes faces at the tall one, who has begun to run after him.

And then there is a roar, a *vroom*. Snow in the distance begins to fly and move, it is a tidal wave. But the wind picks up, the sound is overpowered. And my arms are weak. The noise increases, it's a tornado of the laughter and the wind and the *vroom*. And then the wind takes my burden, the mounds of snow plummet below me and showers the short one. He disappears under it. The taller one picks up speed when he sees, but so does the *vroom*. And then, with a bang, the taller one also disappears. Except with this one, the pile is not white. It turns a dark, dark red. It streaks the ground as the plow truck speeds on.

The light comes on in the building in front of me, but the shower does not begin. Instead, the screaming one's face appears in the window. He pushes the glass open and when he sticks his head into the cold air, he does what he is known for. He screams. The wail this time is not full of pain, of self-pity, of the usual loathing. This is shock, horror. It is real and immediate.

The head of the short one pokes out from under the snow. His hair is speckled with diamond flakes. The new orphan's eyes register the scene. He looks up and his eyes lock with the screaming one.

My leaves are vibrant and viridescent. Heat radiates outward into the bright sky. The short one rests against me. His eyes are on the foliage above. I imagine myself as a vast green canopy. I watch him in the dappled shade, his chest rising and falling with each breath.

The screaming one appears from the house in front of me. He holds two cups of lemonade, the glass sweating in the heat. He passes a drink to the short one as he sits beside him. I imagine that the grass below them is cool, so protected from the brilliant heat by my shade.

I still hear the symphony every morning, but it is different. It begins with a quiet breeze and then the birds join. The duet of the sparrows and starlings. And then two lights turn on, one from in front of me and one from behind me. Two sets of running shower water begin. And then

two screaming voices, two sets of howls from two people who've gone through something so intense they now feel like family. From in front and behind me, they are one.