

“This shit’s clogging up every damn channel.”

Arli’s dad yelled in his drunken ramble

At ten in the morning. On Tuesday. In August.

Summer’s no break, Arli thought, exhausted.

“He had an affair.

Now, everyone’s squandering.

Dammit, who cares?

It’s his dirty laundry

To air out. The problem

In fairness is gossip:

This could be the truth, but it’s probably lies.

It’s atrocious, regardless, to publicize.”

Silently, Arli tidied the kitchen

Desperate to deaden all her father’s bitching.

She knew it was useless. Putridity clogged

Their house just as ceaseless as his monologue.

Still, she gathered the glasses

And plates that laid strewn

Through their kitchen, their bathroom,

And their living room.

A hellscape to live in.

No dwell to raise children.

Arli despaired for the heartbeat that swelled

In her stomach. For, what if the babe heard him yell?

“We should get to decide what we share.

But drama’s so juicy that nobody cares

If someone gets hurt. But what do I know?

Surely, one day, I’ll say, *I told you so!*”

When Arli uncovered

A bowl brimmed with mold

That was buried under

About thirty old

Greasy fast-food bags.

Queasy, the girl gagged.

She couldn’t be sure whether it was the stench;

But swallowed her vomit when her stomach clenched.

When Arli reached over the TV tray

To grab it, her dad yelled, “Get out of the way!”

Cowardly, Arli instinctively ducked,

Releasing a whimper as if she were struck.

When Arli repented,

Her dad rolled his eyes.

“Use your head,” He relented,

And swatted fruit flies

That gathered in clouds

Of black where they crowded

Away from his beer before taking a sip.

Then, Arli saw one crawl over his lips.

“We should be fighting with might to preserve
The right for the privacy we all deserve—
You know what they’re doing, right?” Her father asked
While Arli dumped an ashtray in the trash.

“He advocates for us.
They’re making an ass
Out of him ‘cause he’s fighting for the
Working class.

And he sees the problem;
‘Cause we’ll become jobless
Leeches on welfare if they get their way,
Then we’ll have to do whatever they say.

See what this is? A pathetic distraction.
They spread propaganda so we don’t take action.
And these morons bought it. Truly, it’s rich.”
Arli asked sheepishly, “Speaking of which...

Have you been applying?”
“Oh, get off my back.
You know I’ve been trying,
Stop giving me flack.”

He glowered at Arli.
Devoured brewed barley.
“I’ll get there. It hasn’t been even a year.”
He jiggled his empty, “Grab me a new beer.”

When Arli inspected the fridge, there were none.

So instead from the pantry, she grabbed a warm one.

He shrugged when she warned him. Said, "It's still a beer.

Grab one for yourself. You might as well, dear."

"I can't," she insisted.

Her dad laughed it off.

"I won't tell," He persisted.

He giggled. She scoffed.

"For sixteen, such a prude.

Between us: have a brew!"

Her father pestered and teased. "You know, when

I had my first beer, why, I was just ten!"

A friction-fueled heat ignited her chest.

Her hands clutched her stomach. "Say this is a test."

"Oh, right," he smirked, "The stork on the way.

I'm sure it won't mind. Just one is okay.."

Arli bit her tongue.

"It's only a beer.

Besides, you're too young

For motherhood, dear.

Goodness, you poor kid.

You could just abort it.

No one would judge." Arli's dad reconciled.

What the Hell does he know about raising a child?

She had considered abortion, divided.

But whether she would, she hadn't decided.

Could she raise one here? Could she raise one at all?

Would her friends gossip at school in the fall?

“Your aunt says she's got

An old crib you can use

If that's what you want.

Whatever you choose.”

She did not expect

Her father's direct

Support. So, she smiled. Then, it hit like a blow

To her chest. So, she stammered, “Wait- how does she know

That I'm pregnant? Nobody knows.” She flushed white.

He showed her the post he'd just written last night:

Lord, please be with me, I just cannot bear it:

My baby girl's gonna be a parent.

Send thoughts and prayers,

For this ought to wreck me.

Arli just stared.

Her body chilled, empty.

“Oh boy. *You're* distraught?”

His voice jabbed like a taunt.

“I didn't want to announce it,” she said.

Her stomach twisted. She wished she were dead.