

# Carmelia

## Tommy O'Rourke

Carmelia constantly confused the little hairs on her knuckles for tiny fuses leading to the bottle rocket of her soul. She burnt her fingers bald and even singed some skin into rust blotches with the extra-large matchsticks she used to light her Lucky Strikes. Her fingers were always fiddling with the rosary dangling around her neck, which she constructed in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade using nothing but speaker wire and cigarette butts, both stolen from her father, like her grey-violet eyes. As she danced, her pupils dilated. The booming music. The record player pushed its needle into vinyl to make music out of scratching and spinning. With her bowl cut black hair, she look like an over caffeinated boy when seen through her eleventh story window by the line of sight neighbors in the apartment complex across the parkway. Her window was an outward looking canvas framed by the universe on every side. Her rhythmic figure was framed by a plethora of dulling brick and anonymous city windows, by street-lit sidewalks and Christmas colored traffic lights, by the wealthy northern suburbs and the poverty of the Southside, by the seething center of this planet and the light polluted heavens silently moving through the thick violet night sky, and finally, our Carmelia was framed by the margins of this page.

Every night Carmelia would count the stars. There were no stars. They had been swallowed whole by the myriad of filaments thinning thinning thinning as they hummed themselves away. Carmelia despised fluorescent lighting. She was temporarily suspended from the fifth grade for refusing to remove her sunglasses in Spelling class. Her pupils nearly flooded the entirety of her iris in any light. Those holes always gulped down too much of the world. In bright spaces she would close her eyes and either fall asleep or write out a reality more dimly tinted than this one.

The small studio apartment, which she afforded by buying psychedelics wholesale online and selling it to her faux-friends at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, was lit entirely with Christmas lights year round, the walls and ceiling always covered in primary colors that blended together, coloring the air of her room with a milky glow of light lavender. This light's thick radiation and Carmelia's spasmodic motions to the booming Joy Division record made it look like she was drowning in a water color painting.

Her apartment had the stale smell of cigarettes, marijuana, apple pie, and propane gas, which hissed from her stove subtly at all times, joining the antique coo-coo clock on the kitchen wall in a duet rendition of the immutable music of empty rooms when she was away. They sang to the nothing that filled the apartment whenever Carmelia walked for cigarettes or boarded the 72 bus to pick up the shipments from the anonymously owned post office box, the keys to which lay silently on the loud hardwood floor next to the mattress, in a large wool sock with an unruled journal, green felt tip pen, a Virgin Mary Prayer card with fraying laminate, and a wallet sized photograph of someone she had never met before. She bought it from the Salvation Army on 86<sup>th</sup> street. She couldn't bear to see it lying there, carelessly left to the hopeless enclosure of a small thrift store picture frame, so she placed it in her cart full of books written in languages she couldn't understand and never planned to. Their spines broken and pages coffee stained. Behind the dusted and slightly cracked glass pane was a candid photo of an elderly woman frozen mid-sentence. Her heavy eyes half closed and mouth parted to deliver that type of breathing called speech. Her cheeks, Carmelia thought, were beautiful, broken, and grey like the shattered pavement she flicked her cigarettes onto from her slid open window. From above, she stared down. She imagined those cracks to be rivers that rose from the forgotten dirt deep beneath this concrete city. She would stare down into the miniature fissures until she could envision the city completely decayed, or until she could trace her name in the arbitrary gibberish of the massive, flat, and shattered slab of manmade movable rock. Regarding this digging with vision, Carmelia wrote:

*If liquid keep cement spinning in transit. Pour and muffle crust.mantle. core as a foundation for construction noises that sound like someone quietly speaking, like weeping electronics or gunshots echoing in daylight. Let wet concrete dry when the children finish swimming in it. Mothers tearing gravel from their young flesh.*

The glowing Christmas lights concealed an otherwise vanilla room. Carmelia slept on a mattress with no bed frame in the center of her room. She slept with a silk blanket she had been giving by someone to whom she was too young to say thank you to at the time. She twitched and spoke

frequently in her sleep as if her dreams livened something inside of her that desired to escape her body. When she couldn't sleep, she would reach for the plastic black flashlight she kept beneath her pillow to make shadow puppets on the naked white wall across from the open window, which hung over her head as she sat there in shivering under silk, a cigarette suspended and glowing between her chapped lips, pointing the flashlight with her right hand and making signals to drape shadows with her left. She also wrote poetry by this light.

On the floor beside her record player was a messily stacked pile of newspaper whether forecasts she had gotten in the habit of discretely slipping from the Chicago Sun-Times newsstand each time she wandered to the gas station to purchase her Lucky Strikes. When the sun was too overbearing for Carmelia's light-chugging eyes, she would tape these papers over her blind-less window, making the prophetic text almost hover there on the comparatively transparent and pale paper. The forecast was the only thing she would frequently read other than the Surgeon General Warning on her cigarette packs and her own writing, which she thought was just as toxic and relieving as nicotine.

The paper tabs of acid on her sharp tongue dissolved in the involuntary warmth of salivation as the music pushed her body through the room. The bitter mushrooms that she had chewed and swallowed made her insides feel like a drying machine filled to the brim shattered glass and set on high. She savored the strange taste of them until the point of gagging. It was the unpalatable taste of the natural that reminded her of splashing through mud puddles as a child, when she would wait for the rain to cease before seeking her yellow rubber raincoat. She sensed the artificial comfort, the water resistance, and the yellowness that used to slightly shift the skin tone of her porcelain forearms as she stopped dancing to sit down and pack the white powder DMT into the little glass bong she had named Lolita. DMT is present in almost all things living and when it is released at the moment of psychological death, it spurs the hallucinatory effects of near death experiences. The lighter ignited the bowl into a coal that filled the clear glass with smoke as thick as milk. Carmelia opened her lungs for it and slinked back behind her eyelids before the fog had even finished flowing from her mouth and nostrils.

Carmelia felt her body falling in on itself. She saw with closed eyes an infinity of wet concrete under an overcast sky. Knee deep, she exhaled technicolor hummingbirds into the grey air and bled water from her wrists. She tried to tap the tip of her tongue to the roof of her mouth to make say something, but each attempt yielded a physical, living, and winged utterance. Her propositions would flock and flutter, oscillating in every direction. If she thought without trying to speak, she could sense an

uncomfortable fluttering under her skin, but the hummingbirds had burst through her esophagus with force, swelling her throat. This tenseness in her neck was terrifying, so she withstood the fluttering until all at once, an explosion from every pore. A myriad of flight burst through the skin. The birds were microscopic enough to squeeze through the prison bar pores and swell quickly into their normal forms. At this moment, she suddenly found herself plucked from the wet concrete and gliding through the diverse swarm of songless bright birds. *The positive silence of the universe is perfect music*, Carmelia would have thought, but she was not consciously able to do anything other than absorb this new reality through osmosis. She had been given no means with which to grasp or contort it. Such means would mean leaving this playful coexistence for the consolation prize of understanding. So she fluttered in the cloud of feathers against the contagious grey.

She spat out a mouthful of ash when she awoke. The snow was already six inches thick when Carmelia opened her eyes. It fell from the air just beneath the Christmas lights of her ceiling. It covered every surface of the apartment, even Carmelia, herself, who delicately brushed the snow from her body and rose slowly to her bare feet. The circular white void in the violet sky diffused itself through the cracked window, forcing the frozen accumulation to glisten like diamonds flickering in and out of existence. She hummed into this moonlight and found in her hand a cardinal wrapped in rusted barbed wire. She cut her palms on the jagged spurs and smiled. Little bits of gravel and honey fell from the wounds. She reached for her pen and notebook and wrote something slowly. She slid open her window and climbed to the ledge, still humming to herself aimlessly. The snow still falling. She stepped off the ledge and rose through the pores of the night sky that give way to the hidden infinity of white beneath all things. The note on the desk read:

*Pressed into the cracked patio surface of her family's suburban backyard are two palm prints. Carmelia's hands as a child were massive and ever-reaching, but she grew into them. The impressions in the cement looked like three dimensional cave paintings. The surface began the slow and silent process of shattering that drizzling spring day when she cemented herself into the memory of this inanimate slab. Two decades' passing meant her hands had shattered in place, allowing blades of grass to rise through her palm prints and dance above the swelling snow beneath the flowing smoke of burnt out stars.*