

ZAZEN

Chapter 1—Burning Ants

I went to work and a guy I wait on said he was leaving. He said everyone he knew was pulling out.

“Canada is just not far enough. Mostly Mexico. A bunch to Thailand. Some to Bali.”

He always orders a Tofu Scramble and makes me write a fucking essay to the cook. No soy sauce in the oil mix, no garlic, extra tomato, no green pepper. Add feta. Potatoes crispy and when are we going to get Spelt. He holds me personally responsible for his continued patronage. I hope he dies. I'd like to read about it.

My brother Credence says people who leave are deluding themselves about what's out there. I just think they're cowards. Mr. Tofu Scramble says I should go anyway, that it's too late. I want to but I can't. Maybe when the bombs stop, or at least let up. Nobody thinks it'll stay like this.

My last few weeks down at grad school it was so bad I thought everything was going to shake itself apart. I tried to focus on my dissertation, follow the Diaspora of clamshells, but every night it got worse. It's not any better here.

I was in yoga yesterday and this girl started crying. Raina, who teaches on Mondays, went over put her hands on the girl like a faith healer, her fingers barely grazing the shoulders. She closed her eyes and let the girl cry while she breathed. Everyone was watching like they were going to see sparks or something. I was anyway. I would have liked that. The girl calmed down. Her breath was hard and her eyes swollen. Raina talked about being okay with how you find yourself on the mat and I thought there's no one here who's okay with that. If you took the roof off we would all look like little gray worms, like someone lifted the rock; too close, hot bent and wet. Well, maybe not hot because of the mud but that's still what I thought when the girl was crying. I was glad it wasn't me.

Credence says if half the privileged white marketing reps in my yoga class voted for something other than reductions in their property tax,

something might actually happen. I'd like to see something happen. Something big that wasn't scary, just beautiful. Some kind of wonderful surprise. Like how fireworks used to feel. Now I'm no better than a dog.

Still, there's something true in that yoga manifestation thing because I feel different when I believe different things. Only I don't know how to go back to feeling how I did because I can't re-believe. When the first box-mall-church went up in the blackberry field I wanted some kind of rampant mass stigmata with blackberry juice for blood. It didn't happen. It's not going to. They win; they just roll, pave and drive over everything that's beautiful: babies, love and small birds. On summer nights with the windows open I hear joints cracking like crickets.

I wake up sometimes and feel the nearness of something but then it's gone and I've started to wonder if it was ever there. Lately, I've become afraid that the feeling I used to feel, like something good was waiting, is what people mean when they say "young" and that it is nothing more than a chemical associated with a metabolic process and not anything real at all.

I waited on Mr. Tofu Scramble. He had a date at lunch and they both ordered blackberry smoothies. Vegan. I thought about slipping his date a note telling her that he was a big old cheese eater when she wasn't around. But who am I to stand in the way of love?

I went into the kitchen and pulled a five-gallon bucket out of the fridge. They stack the tofu in soft blocks at the bottom of a bucket of water. With dirty hands I scooped out the tofu and threw a handful into the blender, little white clay hearts. Then I filled it to the brim with blackberries. I pressed the "chop" on the blender because it's louder and takes longer and in a second the blackberries ravaged those little white hearts and turned them dark as a bruise. I left the blender on. It took over the restaurant. Everyone tried harder and harder to ignore the noise but the more they did, the longer I let run. There should be some price to pay for all of this ugliness, especially the pretty kind; especially the kind you don't always see.

Mr. Tofu Scramble looked around and I thought, yeah, that's right, it's you, you Big Old Cheese Eater When She's Not Around. His cheeks reddened and his jaw shifted side to side. He started to look so much like a little kid

staring down at dirty candy that I turned the blender off. It's not all his fault. It's not his fault he's in love and wants quiet blackberries. It's just not his fault.

Even Credence fell in love and got married although I think he secretly wants a medal for falling in love with a black woman. Our parents were so proud. Now, if I could only abandon my heterosexual tendencies as uninvestigated cultural preconditioning and move in with some sweet college educated lipstick-dyke bike mechanic, they could all finally die happy.

I've lived with Credence and Annette for almost six months now. At first I thought that because Annette was black, I wasn't ever supposed to get mad at her. It was like living with an exchange student that spoke English really well.

"Jean-Pierre, what do they call baseball in France?"

"Annette, do you like macaroni and cheese?"

"Daisuke, how is the rebuilding going?"

Credence has a missionary belief in community organizing. He says, "grass roots" like bible thumpers say Jesus.

Hallelujah.

We stopped a Wal-Mart from opening once. For about a minute. It took seven months of door-to-door organizing, leafleting, town meetings, petitions, land-use hearings, senators, phone calls, cold, free doughnuts, and sermons to the choir in the rain with balloons whipping around our faces in the wind while we chant and people drive by in heated sedans and look confused. Take pictures and send it out to everyone who couldn't come to the rally. And it worked. For about a minute. It's hard to do the same thing twice. It's hard to feel the same way you did, especially when you really want to. We just set them back a couple of months on their timetable. Chipped teeth, flags, crosses and white sugar.

I moved in with Credence and Annette during Wal-Mart's Grand Opening. Annette's pregnant but they said I could stay until the twins are born. They gave me their attic, which has dormer windows and a leaky skylight. When I go to sleep I stare up through the glass and pretend that none of us are here.

After I moved in I started collecting maps and putting them on my walls. Gift shop maps with Sea Monsters on them and beveled, unfamiliar coastlines, cold war maps with the Soviet Menace spreading like leprosy. Or pink on a slapped baby's cheek. Red China. (I could never slap a baby. I don't know how anyone could.) Maps of Pangaea and Gondwanaland from back before the seams pulled apart when we were still all one big continent--Deep Time, where each slap on a baby's cheek dissolves into silt. The silt turns into stone and we can tell time by comparing the rates of babies getting slapped. Vio-stratigraphy follows the laws of superposition—one thing always follows another-- A map of The Trail of Tears, bike maps, subway maps and one I drew when I was twelve and wrote "Della's world" in scented marker at the top. Historical, geological, topographical, ideological and imaginary. I was trying to figure out if culture is just geology. Maybe Rwanda was caused by mountain building. And the Russo-Japanese War by glacial till. Maybe you need pirated rivers in the headlands before you can have a Paris Commune.

Then I found a picture of a person setting himself on fire. It didn't say where he was or what he was protesting. He was standing next to a gas can and must have just dropped the match because I could see his clothes. His arms were raised and flailing. I thought of Buddhists who sat quiet as wellwater and burned like candles, like in that famous photo where the monk cross-legged and is on fire in the middle of an intersection while cars drive by and people watch. Everything around him is blurry, the cars, the people, because they're moving. But he's not. He is absolutely sharp because he is absolutely still. Every detail of his robe, his eyelids and the oil from the smoke is absolutely clear.

I first saw that picture in high school. I remember telling Credence about it.

"On fire?"

"On fire." I said.

"You'd have to move."

"They don't move."

"Della,"—like I was doing it on purpose—"Della, their bodies would make them to move. They'd have to"

His voice thinned and the pitch climbed like it always did when we were kids.

“It’s biological,” he squealed, “They wouldn’t have any control over it.”

In 1969 in Prague it took Jan Palach three days to die because he wasn’t trained to just sit there. It was more like what Credence said. He had to move. It was biological.

I started reading eyewitness accounts of people setting themselves on fire. I figured if you can’t trust some hand me down, unverifiable, anonymous hearsay, what can you trust? There were more of them than I thought. There was one yesterday. He set himself on fire to protest a recommendation from a sub-committee to legislate a three percent quota in alternate grain production.

There were Americans, dancing around like sparklers on the fourth of July. There were Basque Nationalists, German priests and Taiwanese publishers. One entry in Wikipedia said, “Kathy Change self-immolated to protest ‘the present government and economic system and the cynicism and passivity of the people.’” And underneath, the afterthought, “MIT student Elizabeth Shin may have committed suicide in this manner.”

One self-immolator was described as disgruntled. Following other names were comments like “supposedly for the same reason.”

I started putting them up on the walls too. I bought a bag of fortune cookies and raided the fortunes. On the back of each I wrote the name of the burned in black underneath their lucky numbers in red.

Jan Palach *Your warmth encourages honesty at home: 718253741.10*
...**Thich Quang Duc** *Magic will be created when an unconventional friend comes to visit: 816223141.24* ...**Elizabeth Shin** *Your future is as boundless as the lofty heaven: 811283645.15* ...**Norman Morrison** *You will be reunited with old friends: 615213840.12*...**Kathy Change** *Your nature is intense magnetic and passionate: 712293644.27*...**Alice Hertz** *Truth is a torch that gleams through the fog without dispelling it: 511243642.24.*

I taped the fortunes to pins like flags and stuck them in the maps. Each city that inspires immolation gets a tiny white flag to flutter. Tiny little surrender. Tiny little surrenders. Supposedly, the heart of the Vietnamese monk from’63 never burned but shriveled to a tiny liver. It is held hostage

(kept safe as a National Treasure) by The Reserve Bank of Vietnam. Tiny liver hearts. I pinned them to the walls. Katydid's flutter all around.

Credence came in one day, looked at the wall and suggested I sign up for yoga classes. He offered to pay. I knew that Credence offering to pay for yoga classes was a sign of the box-mall-apocalypse.

“Hey everyone, how about some yoga classes for Della and blackberry smoothies all around. Today, I’m feeling it, I’m feeling The Rapture,” Credence waves magnanimously. A seal breaks and fire pours out. Joint-cracking crickets search house to house guided by lucky numbers in red. Every time they find a human on fire they read them their fortune and ask if they were born outside of the country. No? Just checking, sir, you understand, we have to ask.

Credence also thought it would be good for me to work in a more positive environment. I don’t know why he thinks watching Wal-Mart crush impoverished communities and cheering like some demented Cubs fan when one structure snaps more slowly than expected isn’t a positive experience.

Strain snap, snap (the sound of a structural integrity failing). Strain snap, snap (a framework for resistance built on signatures and rides to the nearest ballot box). Strain...strain...(screaming fans)...Snap! pause. Strain snap, snap...(oh, but it was great for a second)... snap, snap, snap...The architecture of the new revolution in popsicle sticks which now spread like matted straw before us, each tawny reed a darling to its own mother who can now buy a full set of patio furniture for less than the cost of a box of tampons.

I once burned an ant with a magnifying glass. It moved when it caught fire because it wasn’t trained to sit there. The straw it crawled on, its very own Popsicle stick palace blackened and burned. And you have to sit there or it doesn’t count, but it moved. That’s how I knew it was alive; that’s how I knew what I did was wrong. Little ant? Little ant? And me crying all night long with ash on my hands.

Popsicle sticks. Matted straw. Grassroots. Hallelujah.