

ZAZEN

2—Pregnant Rats

It was decided that it would be good for me to restrict my job search.

“Maybe just to restaurants,” Annette said.

“Or even just vegetarian restaurants,” said Credence, “Nothing too fast paced. Maybe something run by a collective. You know, with art on the walls or some kind of theme.”

I got the job at Rise Up Singing through Credence. He dated a cook there a few years back, a girl named Jimmy. It has a “we all work in hell but that’s okay cause we don’t have to take out our piercing” kind of theme.

Jimmy and Credence met at the Pride March. I was just home from my first year in grad school and told Credence I’d help him with this rally. We went to the march to pass out leaflets for a demonstration he was organizing to try to pressure Payless Shoes on labor standards (7,000,000 million Chinese watch transfixed as Credence and Della hand out lavender leaflets and try to bridge the gap between identity politics and general global class-based oppression. Strain...strain...). Jimmy was on the back of the flatbed with a bunch of other half-naked women cheering on gay Christmas and passing out dental dams and candy.

I started whooping when the parade went by and forgot to hand out fliers. Not Credence. He made sure everyone who passed us had a lavender quarter sheet on sweatshops and fully understood the connection between gender and class. Someone was throwing glitter in the air and it rained on me and I started crying. I always cry at Pride. I can’t help it. It’s like everything’s going to be all right and it’s all going to end well. I just can’t take it.

A big girl, as tall as me, and I’m tall, maybe 5’9 or 5’10 jumped off the back of a truck and ran over to us. Her hair was short on the sides like she’d shaved her head in the past few months. The ends were blonde and the rest, brown. I thought she was Latina but she’s not. She was bare-chested, wearing jeans and suspenders. In her hand she had a plastic firefighter’s hat.

“I’ll take one,” she said.

Credence gave her a stack and started to talk about the campaign but she ran back to the parade to catch up with her float. She swung up onto the back of the truck, put her fireman's hat on and smiled back at us before being swallowed by confetti.

Credence, who's hope never falters, didn't find her obvious gayness to be a stumbling block. She did come to the rally and they hung out. He eventually convinced her that she was committing some form of gender oppression by shutting him down just because he was a dude. That lasted about a minute. I'm pretty sure, from what I know of her, that today she looks on her two months of recalcitrant bisexuality like some sort of Mandan piercing rite; a final trial before being declared gay for life. They stayed friends though and she's been a cook Rise Up Singing since it opened.

So, I started waiting tables at Rise Up Singing. The walls on the outside are the color of egg yolk and there's a mural of neighborhood black people enjoying gentrification on the side of the building. I bet that was one big Popsicle stick snap. SNAP! Toaster prize: one mural honoring multiculturalism on egg yolk. Y'all eat soy, right? Annette, do you like macaroni and cheese?

The owner's name is Franklin. He started Rise Up Singing when every business on the street had bars on the windows.

"I like to think of myself as a coworker with lots of experience rather than a boss," Franklin said.

I like to think of myself as a boss more than a slave but mostly I prefer to not think about it at all because when I think about it, I can't stop.

"Okay," I said.

CoWorker Franklin lowered his voice and leaned in a little.

"We are mostly vegan but we want to be friendly and welcoming to our meat-eating friends so please bear that in mind," he said.

I saw Annette's face looming black and carnivorous. Try to be friendly don't make eye contact, back away slowly. Make macaroni and cheese. Side dishes are non-confrontational and potentially evocative of a southern heritage.

On my first day at Rise Up Singing I waited on both Mr. Tofu Scramble and his nemesis, Ed, Logic's Only Son. They each come every day and sit at the counter with an empty stool between them.

Mr. Tofu Scramble: So, Della, is this your first day? By the way, do you know if Franklin has ordered Spelt yet?

Ed, Logic's Only Son: So what's wrong with butter and cheese? It's not like you have to slaughter a cow to get cheese.

Mr. Tofu Scramble: You know, spelt is better for you than wheat.

Ed, Logic's Only Son: And what about yeast? You drink beer, right? So is beer vegan? Is it okay to kill yeast?

My second day at Rise Up Singing I trained on the opening shift. I showed up early and Ed, Logic's Only Son was waiting for me in front of the restaurant. He had on a bomber jacket and a paperback of the *Martian Chronicles* was tucked under one arm. I could see the comb marks in his gray greased hair. Behind him on the mural wall an enormous black head with an elaborate Pan-African headdress floated in egg yolk.

He tapped a pack of Pall Malls against the butt of his palm and glared at me.

"You're late," he said.

"I'm on time. The person training me is late."

"Who's training you?"

"Mirror," I said.

"These fucking names," he said and shook his head.

Ed pulled the cellophane off the Pall Mall pack, crinkled it into a ball and threw it on the ground where it blossomed into a clear plastic flower.

Mirror was several blocks away biking up the center of the street. Her pink ponytails fluttering behind as she pedaled. When she saw us she waved a friendly unhurried wave. I waved back.

"Fucking Christ!" Ed said and turned away.

Mirror coasted down to where we were and got off her bike.

"Sorry, I'm late. I was up all night sketching these rad fliers for my sex party. You should totally come" she said, then looked over at Ed who was a

beating the *Martian Chronicles* impatiently against his knee, and added
“...Della.”

Mirror unlocked the door and we followed her in. She flipped the lights and started showing me around. The walls inside Rise Up Singing are red, pink and purple. It's like being inside a placenta.

I got the bleach buckets out. Ed stood by the register locked in a staring contest with the unmanned grill. The cook came in, looked at Ed, and walked out back to have a cigarette.

Mirror took out her pigtails and started brushing her hair with an Afro pick. Little pink fuzz balls gathered on the comb teeth and she balled them together and threw them in the trash,

“Della, do you eat meat?”

I used to but I can't. Lately, all I taste is violence.

“Sometimes,” I said.

“Well, don't eat it here. All the cooks are vegetarian. They either burn it because they get grossed out or leave it totally raw on purpose,” it's disgusting.”

Mirror threw another pink fuzz ball in the trash.

“Franklin said you were a geologist or something. Did you like, study at volcanoes?”

“No, invertebrate paleontology.”

“Cool,” she said, “I saw a special on deep-sea vents once. There were all of these white octopuses living down there that turned out to be totally gay. It was really fucking wild,” she rinsed the Afro pick off in the bar sink, “Probably not a great species survival plan, though.”

Ed tapped his coffee cup with a spoon like he was an inmate but Mirror didn't even look up. She has a pretty *laissez-faire* attitude toward customers in general. When I went to turn on the OPEN sign she told me not to because, “If you do that, they'll just come in.” Flawless logic.

At the end of our shift Mirror dumped the tip jar out on the counter.

“I hope Franklin told you we pool tips,” she said and began to separate the change, “He tries to pass it off as communism but it's really so he doesn't have to pay the cooks.”

I adjusted the credit slips and Mirror counted the money into piles then went into the till and grabbed three ten-dollar bills. I thought she was going to make change but she just added one ten to each pile, "Slave tax," she said and paid us out. Jimmy came in through the back door. Her arms were full of lettuce.

"Hey you! I heard they hired you," she hugged me, I'm so psyched."

I hadn't seen her for several years. Her hair was longer in the front and bleached out to a light orange. The back of her head was still clipped and brown. She dropped the lettuce on a nearby counter and came over. I could tell Credence had given her the update by the way she looked at me.

Jimmy had me help her break down produce boxes and we went out to a fenced area adjacent to the restaurant that smelled of rotten yogurt and urine. I ripped staples out of the boxes and Jimmy folded them flat and threw them in a pile. We talked about school and Annette and the Bellyfish and my parents.

"I always liked Grace," she said, "I'd love to see them again sometime."

She asked about the Wal-Mart campaign. I told her it was social bloodsport, which sounded like I was trying to be funny but I wasn't. Credence treats social justice campaigns like sand painting. Everything he does is a fucking seminar on impermanence.

"So do you have any plans?" she asked.

Hang out in the sub-cultural ICU with the free vegan donuts until the bombs stop or everyone else gets to hear them?

"See how it goes."

"Can you hold up the lid?" she asked.

I lifted the green metal top of the recycling container. Jimmy threw the flattened boxes inside then I let the lid fall with a deafening clang.

"Well," she said, "Either way I'm glad you're here."

The way she smiled reminded me of my mom in this particular 1970s Polaroid where she's a young woman bending over to play with a cat. Her hair is light brown and the backyard grass is dry like straw, cropped and short. I had this flash like it might be all right, like there might be a place for me and that I had maybe overlooked something, or lost some kind of perspective and

that now it was going to get fixed. All that day I had that feeling. Like the bombs would dissipate and be no more than white noise like the freeway or the sea.

I biked past the yoga studio on my way home. It was getting pretty dark but the streetlights weren't on because they had just switched to the new schedule. I know it's because of the war. Credence says it hasn't started yet but he's wrong. They rationing power and the TVs are on all the time.

I pulled my bike up onto the curb by the yoga studio and leaned it against the trashcan. I watched the yoga class through the glass. The lights dimmed and everyone moved in amber. They flickered like votives when the teacher crossed back and forth in front of the window and I thought, that's what we will all be one day, insects in sap, strange jewels.

The following week Coworker Franklin scheduled me to open the restaurant alone. The first day I got there early and it was still dark. I turned on the light in the pie case and it lit the whole room. I wiped the specials from the night before off the board. Outside the world was blue.

I went to get more bread from the back and was reaching into the pantry when I felt something near my foot. I jumped back and turned on the overhead light. On the ground in front of the pantry was a small brown rat. It was dying.

The rat held itself still and waited. Its fur glistened and it had tucked its paws in close so that its belly bulged out from the sides. I wondered if it, if she, was pregnant like Annette. I got down on my knees and slowly leaned over so I could see her face. She didn't move and didn't look at me. Her breath quickened and she looked straight ahead. I felt her fear like a wave of nausea.

Jimmy came in behind me.

"Franklin puts out poison. I think he thinks it's more humane than traps."

She leaned over.

"Has someone shown you what to do?"

"No."

She went into the walk-in and got a slice of cheese then had me scoop up the rat up with a dustpan and follow her outside.

We walked along a garden path toward the back fence. The sun was just hitting the green wet vines and red tomato skins. I passed a cluster of sunflowers. Behind them stretching along the fence was a row of dirt mounds with tiny homemade crosses sticking out of them.

“This is where we put them,” Jimmy said.

I looked down a row of dew covered twig crosses drying the morning light.

“When the health department comes we pull the crosses out and say it’s squash.”

Jimmy took the dustpan from my hands and laid the pregnant rat in the furrow between two graves. She pulled the paper off the cheese, tore it into little strips and left it beside her.

“We’ll bury her later. She’ll be dead by the end of the shift.”

The rat settled into the furrow of earth and tucked her paws underneath again. She put her nose down and shook. Jimmy pushed the cheese closer but the rat didn’t move. Again, I felt her fear come like nausea.

Pregnant Rat *Your thirst for knowledge will impress your enemies:*
563882981.23. Rumors of a heart unburnt and preserved in mud, buried inside a cage of ribs (kept safe as a National Treasure). Basta! Rat Golgotha, Presente! All around me were small snapping sounds that only a mother rat would hear and maybe only if the air were very still.