

# ZAZEN

## Chapter 4—The Asian Market

The windows of the Asian market were steamed and I smelled shrimp frying. Strings of packaged candy hung like beaded curtains and bowls of jade sat on dark lacquer shelves. I picked up a calendar that was lying on a wicker chair. It was full of Chinese girls wearing satin. When I flipped through it, it sounded like a fan whirring in another room.

On the grocery side a cook was stirring a pot and yelling in Chinese. Then he yelped and threw something. There was a huge clatter of thin metal, like a tray of spoons falling. A woman came out and they started arguing. The cook was holding a towel around his hand and kicking the oven door. I could see him through the hanging meat. He was just beneath two birds strangled and dangling with feet twined and tied to a crossbeam. The fluorescent light made the cook's skin look gray and yellow against his white shirt.

I looked through a basket full of Buddhas on the shelf next to me. Some were brass and others were gunmetal gray, no bigger than bullets. One was the size of a golf ball. I picked it up and thought about buying it and throwing it through the glass door of the box-mall-church. But the door wouldn't break no matter how hard I threw it and I couldn't do it anyway. I'd be afraid I'd hit someone or scare some kid so I put it back. I'm sick of how they always win.

On the floor was a basket full of fans. They had bamboo spines and collapsed like butterfly knives. Fans with flowers, pagodas, birds and the names of cities: Bangkok, Osaka, Tokyo on orange skies with burgundy suns and I thought, I need to get something, something for someone but I didn't know whom. I tried to imagine giving a fan to Annette. Maybe one that said Phnom Penh in red over a field of yellow. I could leave it on her nightstand and she'd put it somewhere special. But I couldn't take what it would mean to her. That would just be too much. I picked out a white fan with a single black branch on it. Good for all occasions.

The boxes of fortune cookies were at the end of the aisle. A recent shipment had come in. I usually get a bag, which has about thirty useable fortunes but I decided to buy a whole box, which has twenty bags. It was more than I'd ever bought until then and I felt a slight reeling in the deepest part of my abdomen. I took the fan and the box up to the register and paid. It started to rain really hard and they let me hang out inside to see if it would let up.

I was leaning against the gumball machines by the front window and trying to stay out of the way. Outside, under the awning was a red metal newspaper stand that had been tagged and dented. Through the glass and wire grid holding the paper I saw a picture of a woman crouching, aflame. A man and a young girl were running down a street. Behind them was a wall of smoke. On the side, down in the corner of the photo was the person crouching. All around her fire, like a corona, spread into the black ink. She was as dark as an eclipse and held herself still and burned. Chinese characters ran in lines down the page around her. That reeling came again, only deeper, like something was shaking loose in a place that nobody had ever been before. The cook with the hand wrapped and burnt, the box-mall-church and the huge Asian markets out by the mall with Freezer Kings full of fish, white as porcelain, frozen, chopped and lying like mahjong pieces in pink plastic trays. And I thought this is not some vibrant, new glittering incongruity. I know. I see glittering incongruities. I see people on fire. Right there on the front page of newspaper, leaning against the gumball machine because it was raining so hard, I saw her on fire in the corner of the photo, crouching. Then I felt the panic like I do all when it's like that, like it's happening right now, like they're dying in front of me.

I turned to get help, to ask the man at the counter or the woman in back what had happened. They said it was just sports. Apparently there was a big game and some jocks set some stuff on fire. It happened days ago. Everyone is fine. But they're not. I can see from their faces. I can't speak Chinese but I can tell they are not fine. Sports. Sports riot. I took a few breaths and tried to calm down. Raina says nothing's ever really wrong it's just the story we tell ourselves. I think it's the other way around. But I tried anyway. I rewrote the events in the picture. The woman crouching in the smoke had pockets full of bobbleheads. The man and the young girl had just shared a hot dog and arena nachos. It wasn't the war. It was just a game. But of course it was the war, I could hear it breathing under the net.

Down the street I heard some kind of blast or crash. Following the Law of Superposition it should be: Sound>Association>Meaning> RXN—but it isn't order because the meaning never changes and the sound can be anything. There was a rumble that I couldn't place—step out on to the broadening path! On even the brightest days when everyone is shining in the sun-flooded world what's wrong with a golden retriever playing with a pink child on a green field? A red Frisbee cutting through the blue sky under a white cloud? Nothing. It makes watching it all get blasted to tendons and fur so life-like. Sports riot. Terror is a chemical storm. The events are static, not the meaning. Sports.

I left the box of fortunes by the register, said I'd get it later. In front of the Asian market I could hear for a thousand miles. The rain was getting lighter and the streets shone. On the corner was sports bar. I know because it had a poster of a rabid dog tearing some other animal apart and a co-ed with team color panties on the door. The parking lot was full of tanks and The Game reflected off their windshields—I dreamt one thousand basketball courts, nothing holier than sports—I'm going to make them feel what I feel and I went to a payphone by the bus stop, I mean what it's like to be fucking scared all the time and caught up in the center of some big horrible thing you have no control over that you can't even feel the edges of and living in a twinkling slideshow of species trauma.

I looked up the number of the sports bar and called in a bomb threat. Told them they were all going to die in multiple explosions during the fourth quarter and then I went and looked through the windows to see what would happen. But nothing did. They were pink and bored. The bartender finished a crossword puzzle. One guy near the TV yelled when a ball switched hands and slammed his fist down on the table knocking off a red plastic ashtray, which rattled in circles on its rim then stopped. They are untouchable.

I waited a little while then called Jimmy. I asked her to pick me up because I didn't want to call Annette. She showed up in her truck. I got in and put the box of fortunes between us on the seat.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Sure. I love watching the ship timbers wash ashore in the tide.

“I'm tired.”

We pulled out into traffic and sat there with the windows down and water coming in everywhere because the defrost doesn't work and the windows fog up. Everyone was going under forty because it was rush hour and the rain was so hard. She turned on the radio and dialed it to a Mexican station but the engine hum cancelled out everything but the brass. Half a conversation. The trumpets were answering something inaudible. We didn't talk until we got out on the freeway. Mirror had told me she was leaving. I think Credence said something about it too but I had put it out of my mind.

“I got my ticket today,” Jimmy said.

“Costa Rica?”

“No, Honduras.”

Cars sped up and fanned as a newly built fifth lane appeared on the left shoulder for half a mile then disappeared and drove us all back together.

“I got you a fan,” I said, “As a going away gift.”

Another pool of light.

“Yeah,” Jimmy rolled the window up some, “I’m about done with all of this.”

The traffic slowed near a huge billboard made of lights. It had a truck on it that spun in a circle and then exploded into yellow stars. Every time it happened Jimmy’s face lit up and the fine brown hairs on top of her head turned gold. She looked like she had an aura and I thought, maybe that’s how people see them. Maybe you have to know someone really well to see those things.

“It has a cherry tree on it,” I said.

“What has?”

“The fan I got you. It’s all white with a black cherry tree on it. I think it’s winter. There aren’t any blossoms.”

Another burst of the billboard lights and Jimmy’s hair was gold again. Even her eyelashes, when she turned her head, sparked then blackened. The traffic thinned and we started to move. The windows were still down far enough that the rain stung my cheeks as we picked up speed. She reached across and wiped fog from the windshield with her forearm and everything became clear. I didn’t know it wasn’t until she wiped it away and then it was so sharp it seemed ridiculous. Through the glass where the arc of Jimmy’s arm had stopped and under the canopy of fog I saw a river of dark shadows glinting dully off each other. Steel and taillights poured into the valley then splashed up over the edge of a distant rise.

“Maybe I’ll get a ticket too,” I said.

A passing neon sign splashed vermilion on Jimmy’s cheek. Again, I saw Grace. My mother, back before her hair turned dark and her eyes crawled the world like spiders. Suddenly, I got the idea that I wanted Jimmy to think about me when she was gone. I wanted her to say my name. I reached over and touched her face. She twitched so I pulled my hand back.

“What are you doing?”

“If it’s not okay I won’t.”

She looked at me then back at the road. Cars coasted like blackbodies cooling in a sea of brakelights.

“Well,” she said after a minute, “I guess it’s okay. Just strange.”

I touched her face again. I thought about telling Credence and how he would think it was funny. But it wasn’t. Not really. It was as fucked up as everything else. Now? That hard? No, it doesn’t hurt. It’s all about the breathing. It’s about how much fear you hide in your cells: blue cells, green cells, red cells, sickle cells, sleeper

cells, jail cells—people are shot through with it. But I don't hold my fear there. Everybody needs a place where they're fearless or they'd never survive, at least I wouldn't. Sometimes I hate this world. Especially when it's more beautiful than I can imagine.

The freeway lights stuttered and the valley sank. We ran with the rest of the traffic into a furrow lined with restaurant chains and competing gas prices. Jimmy's skin was light brown above her jeans and cream colored below like I thought it would be. And maybe I saw a garden beyond a gate. And maybe it wasn't a garden but a reflection of a garden. It was so clear to me now. I just somehow hadn't seen it. Everything had already erupted. There was nothing to save. I had been kissing the hems of ghosts.