

# ZAZEN

## Chapter 14—Two Rivers

Annette left a black dress and a gray wool scarf, which belonged to her grandmother, draped over my computer chair the next morning. I showered and put it on.

The funeral for the boys was going to start at the church around 3pm and be followed by a procession to the cemetery. After the eulogy some community leaders were going to speak. Then everyone was supposed to march to the Roseway Bridge and throw flowers in the river near where they found the boys. A riot would be inescapable, that's what most people said. The city had already revoked the permit to march. They said it was because of the auto shop and the New Land Trust bombings, a matter of public safety.

"It sure is. Theirs," said Annette throwing a skillet into an empty sink where it clanged against the steel basin.

Credence said everybody was going to have to be extra disciplined.

"Well, if there's a riot, you know who's going to start it," Annette said.

She turned on the water but walked away from the sink. Credence turned it off.

Jimmy called to tell me that the staff meeting at Rise Up Singing was going on as scheduled. Apparently, Coworker Franklin had meditated on the idea of cancelling (due to the bombs and the funerals) but his inner coin-flip had come up Capitalism. He wanted to re-open as soon as possible.

"As a victim myself..."

(Coworker Franklin tries to equivocate the looting of Rise Up Singing with the slaughter of children)

"...I think the most important thing for the community is that we get back on our feet."

A defiant cheek to the wind, cannon to the right, vegan sushi bar to the left—but as an olive branch, Coworker Franklin said we could talk about the shootings "as a family." The first fifteen minutes of the agenda would be set aside for that process. Jimmy was disgusted.

"Isn't that a bunch of bullshit? I'm not even going."

“It’s mandatory, isn’t it?”

“Fuck him, I’m leaving anyway. What’s he going to do, fire me?”

Right. Queen of the Jaguars.

I decided to go, but mostly so I had an excuse to leave the funeral early. I didn’t know how much I could take. All that sorrow just spinning out into nowhere.

The streets around Higher Ground of Africa Baptist were packed with people. There was no way I was getting inside the church. It took me twenty minutes to make it through a block. About halfway into the thickest part of the crowd, I saw Credence. He was jammed up against a side door of the church that had been opened to let air into the building. A group of twenty or so, mostly younger men, stood next to him looking in. I worked my way there. He saw me and held out his hand and when I was in range pulled me through the crowd. I looked around to see if there was anybody there that I knew, but there wasn’t. If there had been I would have seen them for sure.

Credence was about to say something to me when a chorus of shouts deafened us. Over the shoulders of the congregation I saw a man with stained glass light on his face gesturing at the ceiling. He waved his arm across the crowd and then brought it back to his heart. I thought for sure he would catch fire. I almost heard the hissing of wet wood.

Another cheer went up for Jesus but everyone near me was silent. They rustled impatiently in their suits and leaned in closer then the crowd inside began to move and the choir started up. People by the doors were telling us to move back, move back, and ushers lined up on either side of the main entrance. Through the side door I could see them carrying out the coffins. People gathered around the pallbearers in front of the church. The coffins looked like driftwood in an eddy and I thought the crowd wasn’t going to let them through but then two hearses drove slowly through the mass of people and they parted. Suddenly still, they watched the pallbearers slide the caskets into the backs of the cars and were silent until each door had slammed shut. Then a roar went up and the hearses began to roll down the street. People

closed in around us. We passed the church in a torrent of bodies and poured out onto Heritage Avenue.

We came to the cemetery. The crowd split in two columns and peeled off to the side so that the hearses could drive through the center gates first. I was up front by then so I stood back and let the second hearse pass. From where I was I could see the statue of the Mermaid and the garden by the older graves where I'd called in bomb threats only the night before.

I looked around for Credence and Annette but didn't find them and after the first round of speakers, I slipped off through the cemetery and down to the river. The march would come there anyway. I looked up and down the banks. I could see for miles along the promenade. I headed toward the Roseway Bridge. I found a spot on the grass rise where the bank and bridge met. The grid of the walkway was over my head and behind me the steel girders were driven into the hillside. I waited.

Something was wrong. I heard it from a long ways away. The marchers were coming but something had happened. I could hear the people with the bullhorns trying to keep the crowd together but the sound was building. I crawled up further underneath the bridge as the sound grew. A bottle smashed to pieces on the cement and the funeral procession began to pass. My view was blocked by crossbeams and I could only see their legs, brown skin, black pumps, black slacks shiny white Nikes. Under the cement lip of the bridge, I stayed tucked. There must have been a thousand of them. Around my feet candy wrappers, bottles and paper were strewn. I kicked my way back further up the dirt part of the hill until all I could see was the slate gray river stretching out through the steel eyelets on either side of me.

When the riot cops came I was wedged way, way up under the bridge. I couldn't see the area below me at all by then but I could see out the sides in both directions. The spot where the boys had been found was just a little further up and that's where the procession began to pool. The riot cops were coming down the hill in formation. A bottle sailed over the divide between them and shattered. Then another. And the shiny black birds they beat their plastic wings. Clattering, they hit their shields. Faster and faster, until they broke and charged the crowd. The march exploded into slivers under the

impact. And I could feel it in the air, it was more than a riot and more than a funeral, it was the conjunction of those two, grief and fear, fueled by the bombs and media cycling, combusting all around us. People ran in all directions trying to get away. I saw more bottles come down near some cops. One got hit and the Bird-Crickets fell like a pack on a person running up the hill. But he didn't throw the bottle. I saw it. It came from above me like the others. Someone on top of the bridge. Then they started firing tear gas randomly into the crowd and I scrambled out from my hiding place, sliding down the embankment and ran out onto the promenade. A concussion grenade went off right beside me and I dove for the grass. When I got up, I couldn't hear anything out of my left ear. A man who had been talking to Annette earlier, stopped to see if I was okay. I asked him if he'd seen her. He said she and Credence didn't join the march. He said they left right after the burial and that they were probably home by now. Then he picked up a 40 oz bottle that was near my feet and hurled it. Run, he said and I did. A volley of rubber bullets whistled overhead and blasted the bark off a tree as I ducked behind. In one ear I heard a great roaring filled with screams and explosions. In the other ear a profound silence. Running again, I could feel my blood vessels swell and my heart beat like it was underwater. I was halfway back up the hill to the cemetery before I realized no one was following me. I was alone but I kept running until I got to the Mermaid statue at the edge of the graveyard then collapsed on a bench beneath it.

My lungs hurt and I still couldn't hear anything out of my left ear. The concussion grenades sounded like firecrackers in the distance. I pulled out my phone. But this time there was no reception. I couldn't get back home without crossing the riot so I decided to try to make it to Rise Up Singing and call Credence and Annette from a landline. Above me were ribbons of light but I couldn't tell what time it was.

The trees by the Mermaid are the oldest and their branches form a canopy so it is always evening in there. I thought maybe I had lost track of the hours but when I came out through the gate the sun was still high. The day was filled with normal Sunday sounds. Across the street a little boy was playing in the

yard of a partially remodeled house, balancing a rock on a can of Jasco and knocking it off again.

I cut across the lower part of the hill, walking parallel to Colony of the Elect. Everywhere I saw kids, sun wheels spinning in the breeze and hearty blonde neighbors helping each other out. The Dawn of Compassion had come. Suffering had ended. There were traffic circles and recycling bins to prove it. At one point the trees broke and I could see the river again. Puffs of tear gas like a gentle mist appeared then dissipated along the promenade.

Duct-taped to the door of Rise Up Singing was a proclamation from Coworker Franklin. It expressed regret at the recent bombing of the auto shop and begged people not to steal from COWORKER FRANKLIN because he was a PARTNER and a FRIEND of the COMMUNITY and often made them MACARONI AND CHEESE. At the bottom was a stick figure with open arms next to something that looked like a moebius strip.

The meeting was in the garden. I went in the side door by the trash and recycling and even before I got there I could feel the shift in energy from the bombings. It wasn't fear, like it had been down by the bridge. It was excitement. Like power was running through everyone and we were now connected in some kind of electric field. Everyone but Coworker Franklin.

The entire staff, save Jimmy, was standing around a table full of donuts and shots of Cuervo. No one was drinking or eating. They were making Franklin pay and the sun made the donut glaze shine.

I asked Mirror if I missed anything.

"No. Just Fucking Franklin admitting he's a sellout who should die, which we already know. What time did you leave the other day?"

I told her I wasn't sure.

"By the way," she said, "That stupid cat never came back. I spent the whole morning shaking a bowl of Meow Mix like a fucking shaman."

She said something else but I didn't quite hear it. I was half in the riot and half in the restaurant. I could see now that there were rivers, each flowing through the same place. Reaching deeper, I saw a third river, pooling in the Mermaid garden. They were irreconcilable geographies.

Coworker Franklin was talking about the sale of the restaurant, assuring everyone that a great new era was coming. That the people who bought the restaurant were enlightened. That there would be Lotus chairs made by Real Tibetans. Distressed wood platters of hewn hemp. The latest in Neo-Colonial Fusion Cuisine. A patio. Orchids. A bocce court and a Koi Pond where now there was only a Rat Graveyard.

“In this time of change,” Coworker Franklin waved vaguely at the world of bombs, malls, and riots outside the garden, “It’s all the more important that we stay together, even if we’ve chosen to walk in different directions.”

Mirror passed me a folded up sheet of paper. Inside was her rendering of the stick-figure from Franklin’s sign. Next to it was a huge Salmon about to tear it in half over which she’d written “Stick-Franklin in the Afterlife”. I drew a killer comet inches from Stick-Franklin’s head and passed it to Mitch who spent at least twenty minutes on a four panel strip of Stick-Franklin dissolving in lye.

“But like any birth process,” Coworker Franklin said, “It’s going to be hardest during the transition. There are going to be some new rules,” he looked around nervously, “To start with you are all going to have to get your Food Handler’s Cards.”

Mirror rolled her eyes, “No way dude, waiting in that line sucks.”

“And...”said Franklin, “Just so you know, they’re going to shorten the name to “Rise.” Which I think is really very cool. I saw it on the new menus. They look great. **COPPERPLATE**. It’s a nice font.”

I was the first to hear it. Tiny popping sounds in the distance. A quiet siren. Some dim chirping. One or two people glanced over the garden fence but then went back to glaring at Franklin. As evening came the sounds drew closer.

Coworker Franklin was talking about the schedule.

Police cars pulled around the corner and raced down the side street. Their blue and red lights reflected off the windows of the apartment buildings. For a second, I saw the scene as it would be on another night. The same blue and red lights dancing on the Koi pond, turning to rose and violet the white

arbor trellis with its bending boughs to come. Occasional explosions like fireworks and the sky.

Coworker Franklin was talking about the robbery on the night of the shootings. How he got to the restaurant around 3am and seen a man by the shed, probably someone from the neighborhood who knew we didn't lock the side gate. And how the man was wearing a red bandana, and had something in his hand, probably a gun. And how with all the gang stuff going on, he decided to call the description in to the police.

"I don't expect much to come of it," he said.

But of course something had. I jerked my head around to look at the Rat Graveyard. I saw only the trampled crosses. Buzz Lightyear and the red bandana were gone.

My breathing slowed. I couldn't feel my hands. The whole world was dipped in nitrogen and the slightest shift would shatter it. Like tying a toy to a twig cross, or calling in a description of a black man with a red bandana, and something (probably a gun) in his hand. Or walking down an empty street drunk and washing your hair with stolen wine.

All the little spider cracks.

I didn't say—the Buzz Lightyear you tied to the cross on the grave of the Rat Queen with the boy's bandana got him killed. I didn't say—the red bandana you found carefully folded and hidden in the shed belonged to the boy who was shot. I didn't say—the reason Coworker Franklin called in the description of the boy in the first place was because the restaurant had been looted and he thought the boy was involved. And I didn't say—it was us. It was me. I didn't say anything because it was all a hopeless charnel ground. Even though I hated it, I was as entangled as everyone else. I was part of how one thing led to another.

After the meeting I wandered alone and in the dark. I could hear the Bird-Crickets far better than they could hear me. What was left of the riot was injured and clumsy, easily approached and easily avoided. I went to Jimmy's.

She stood in the archway between two rooms.

"How is Annette? I heard there was a police riot."

I shrugged.

“By the way,” she said, coming closer, “I was thinking, and I changed my ticket, pushed it back a week. I figured we could hang out a little more before I left.”

She smiled and I heard another little spider crack. And, like the two rivers with the third hidden underneath, and the Buzz Lightyear, the bandanna and the boy, I saw then that there was not a single move I could make that had no effect.

I put my hand against her ear. I still couldn't hear out of mine.

Jimmy talked about Honduras and what we could do if I came down there. I let her talk even though I knew I wasn't going.

Later, we went salsa dancing at a Latino bar in the old international district. We had to tell them we were sisters so that they'd let us dance together. Then when we were leaving, I kissed her in front of all of them outside on the street with the light of the Salvation Army sign falling down all around us. She told me that we might have to do the same thing when we were in Honduras, pretend we were sisters. I said that was all right.

On the way home I found myself wondering how many chances we get.

Raina believes in reincarnation.

“What about birds?” I asked, “Will they all be birds again? Do sparrows become starlings, or does it go the other way? What happens after you're a blackberry bush?”

“Well,” she said, “I think we're here for a reason and that whatever we haven't learned before we get to learn now. Some of us won't have to come back.”

I'm learning how to call in bomb threats and bury rats in the back of a restaurant without tipping off the health department. Do I have to come back?

Mirror believes in reincarnation too.

“Dude, I am totally coming back as a black chick.”

“Why?”

“Cause they're hot.”

“You don't get to pick. That's the whole idea.”

“Right, you earn it. And I totally deserve to be a hot black chick.”

“What about the black chicks? What do they become?”

“Nothing. That’s it. They’re done. They’re the head of the line. Unless they shoot someone or run over a kid or something like that. Yeah,” she said, “I’m going to be as black as a Nigerian with a huge fucking pink Afro. It’ll be totally hot.”

I want to be a coral reef. Credence should be a dog salmon. All those kids they blew up in that school last year should get to be silk moths or new planets.

I walked up the steps to the house, put my key in the door and turned it as quietly as I could. That’s the problem with me. I want to believe in a world of endless second chances but I can’t.