

## ZAZEN

### 15—Head of John the Baptist

Tamara said MANIFESTATION was a hoax. I wanted to push her down the stairs but my arms were full of boxes. We were loading a van with decorations for Mirror's party. She came up to me on the landing, just to goad me more. I'm a foot taller. If I hit her it would hurt. I thought about that going down the stairs.

"How do you know it's a hoax?" I said, "Half the town is still blocked off."

"Because they haven't found a single bomb. They don't even think it's related to the parking garage or dog track."

"They don't know. It could be related."

"Well, do you believe it is?" She stepped in front of me to push open the front door, "Or do you think it's a hoax?"

The rain was so loud I could barely hear. I tried to go through but Tamara was holding the door and blocking it all at the same time.

"Well," I said jamming her against the doorframe, "I don't think it was a joke. I would have been scared. If someone called and said they were going to blow the place up. I would have been terrified."

Tamara grinned, flashing her broken incisor and moved aside.

Mirror backed the van over the curb and honked. We started running the boxes off the porch. It was a fucking downpour. I could see Mirror in the front of the truck, talking to someone on the phone and eating a cupcake.

"In fact," I said throwing some boxes into the back, "I like what they're doing," I slammed the van door, "Someone should be drawing those lines," I was shouting, "Pointing that stuff out. People should have to think about what they do. If no one gets killed, even better."

"Right," Tamara yelled, "Think. Think about it. Not do anything about it. If you like that stupid group so much why don't you go join up. It couldn't be that hard. I'm sure they have a blog."

"Oh yeah, it would have been much better if they actually blew up the dog track."

“See!” she laughed, “You don’t believe they did it either.”

“I don’t care who blew up the dog track! It wasn’t exactly a call for class war. I mean who even goes to the dog track? Poor, stupid, white people. They need to be organized, not traumatized over the death of their favorite dumb fucking anorexic greyhound.”

I stomped back up the stairs. I was about to make another point, a really good one about vanguards as a form of sub-cultural delusion, when Mirror came in, freaking out because the eyehooks at the warehouse weren’t going to hold and she wanted slings and a trapeze at the party.

“Hang plants,” I said.

“It’s supposed to be sexy,” she screamed, “Not some hippy soft porn garden scene. Nobody wants to look up and see ferns.”

“And what you’ve got can’t hold a person?”

“Not with the kind of torque we’re going to be putting on it.”

“Post a weight limit,” I said.

“The fucking fat chicks would slay me. Slain. I would be dead. No more parties. Ever. I would need to slit my throat to have an afterlife.”

She kicked a box of glassware.

“This rain sucks. I’m totally going to get a yeast infection if I keep eating this much sugar.”

She threw the half eaten cupcake in the trash.

The phone rang. She asked me to get it. It was Devadatta.

“Turn on the TV.”

“I don’t think there is a TV.”

Mirror made devil’s horns with her fingers to signify television.

“No. No TV.”

“Well, they blew up that temp agency. You know the one out by the malls, Brass Ring? They blew it up.”

“That was a hoax,” I said, trying not to look at Tamara.

She smiled.

“I’m watching it now. The blast took out the whole front.”

I fell into a frozen river once. It was like that. I held the phone away from my ear. Tamara saw my face and came around behind me so she could hear too.

“Were there others?”

My voice was so quiet I’m surprised she could understand what I said.

“Yeah, they found another bomb in the Olde Towne Mall. You know where all the high school kids hang out? But they got that one before it went off.”

Tamara turned on the radio. They were two more, one by the loading dock of Transcontinental and the other in a small Pho Place that served over 100 kinds of Bubble Tea.

And I thought I heard a bomb go off nearby, but it was someone closing a door. The car engines sounded like low flying planes and the woman outside clapping for her dog to come, like round of concussion grenades. I was an atom. Electron cloud awareness charged everything around me. I could feel a signature of myself, way, way beyond the universe.

I had done something terrible.

“I guess I was wrong about that group,” said Tamara, getting a cup of water, “Maybe they are about something after all.”

I didn’t say anything. I was running over the list trying to figure out how many places I’d called.

We went to a bar with a TV and stared for an hour. Devadatta met us there. Bomb squads and cameras were trained on the New Land Trust Building like it was a birthday cake with a stripper inside. Then they cut back to Brass Ring with its missing face.

“Man,” Mirror said, “Just look at that.”

I couldn’t stop. I saw the buildings burn in live time. People were crying. They were scared. High school girls huddled together waiting for their parents to come get them. A little Vietnamese boy wailed in his mother’s arms. Oh god, I thought, oh god, oh god, oh god, oh god, oh god, oh god, oh god, oh god, oh god, oh god...and I ran my shaking hands through my hair. With short sharp fingernails I scratched at my chest until it was red with crosshatches.

Newscaster Ken’s Black Friend Garth was interviewing Crickets.

“Chirp, chirp, rutuhtuhtuhvrrrrrr... MANIFESTATION. Chirp, chirp, rrrhhhtuhtuhvrrrrrr...”

Mirror got up, “Everything is going to be fucking closed for days.”

What was she talking about? She was talking about the sex party.

“What?” I asked.

“I said I don’t care what’s going on. There’s no way I’m cancelling this party. Letting the terrorists win, and all.”

Devadatta got up too, “Oh! I forgot,” she said, “I talked to Raina and she’s definitely coming to the party. She’s even talking about leading a class there, you know, like an intermission. That way everyone can stay grounded. Most people never get to practice yoga naked. I really think it will help keep people in their bodies.”

“Whatever,” Mirror said, “Just don’t make it too granola. Focus on stretching the perineum. Mula Bandha, that’s something people could use for sure. Remind me tonight and I’ll get mats.”

They left. I barely noticed. My eyes were on the Miracle Station. Where it was all burning and no one had been hurt. New ejecta glittered in the terrosphere.

“Come on,” Tamara said, “I’ll walk you home.”

She dragged me off the stool but I blocked the doorway because I couldn’t stop watching. She had to pull me out.

“Relax, Della. Everyone’s fine.”

The people on the street said it was a miracle. Not one person hurt. Tamara thought it was a miracle too and I started thinking about it. It couldn’t be an accident. Whoever did it must have been really careful. They must have meant for those other bombs to be found. From a few steps back, I saw the natural balance of cause and effect dancing. Karma created long before me. With every block I grew more confident. I hadn’t bombed those places. They deserved it, but I hadn’t done it. I was sick of feeling responsible for other people’s decisions. Paying for other people’s wars. My muscles began to relax and instead of horror, something else filtered through, the faint thrill of becoming. It was a miracle.

The Saint with Black Tears passed me and waved, her children safe at home.

Tamara was walking beside me, talking about something but I wasn't listening to her. Up the street I heard the jackhammers. They're building a supermarket made of mud. It's going to have valet parking, be completely organic and only fish that was inhabited by the souls of former rapists will be sold. Workers get emergency room coupons and free coffee.

I looked at the sky. Everything has a beginning, middle, and end. The rain had stopped. Then it started again. It wasn't personal.

We got to my door. Nobody was home. Credence had been trying to reach me all day. He wanted to talk about the upcoming Anniversary at Grace and Miro's house. And Grace had been calling too, but just because Annette told her I was gay. She barely mentioned the bombings in her message. They were, after all, just a natural consequence of late stage capitalism. This new wave of attacks would be no different to her than the ones from days before. But it was to me because it was my own flag, waving back across the gulch.

Tamara and I went upstairs. I showed her the Paper Mache Head of John the Baptist. She laughed so hard I thought she was going to choke.

"Better than a career in academia, isn't it?" I said, "The cheeks are made of sought after recommendations."

My pride. Taking credit coming and going.

Tamara was on her back, tears rolling down her face leaving little webs of eye make-up under her eyes.

"What are you going to do with it?" she asked when she got breath.

"Give it to my brother for his birthday. Zipped in a body bag with *For the Fairest* written in Greek across the front. And a My Pretty Pony inside."

She didn't know what I was talking about. I didn't know what I was talking about. It didn't matter. She sat up, flushed, looking about thirteen years old.

"Let's take it somewhere and let some kids bash the hell out of it!"

We put the head in a pillowcase and caught a bus to the Ukrainian neighborhood out near Pretty Little Hopes. The rain had let up a little but the

sky was still dark. On the way we got bags of candy, a cheap baseball bat and some twine. Everywhere around us people were glued to their televisions or on the phone. Sirens sounded intermittently. A couple of times I wanted to turn back but Tamara wouldn't let me.

We found a tree near a middle school and strung the Head of John the Baptist up. Kids started gathering even before we were done. I let a tall fat boy with an Ozzy patch on his jacket have the first go. We blindfolded him with his friend's bandana and spun him around. His first swing missed but his second cracked the cheek of John the Baptist. Next up was a girl with stringy hair and new breasts. She crushed the Prophet's chin. After her came two boys, one after another, each small and fast but neither of them left a mark on the head.

A sheet of sunlight came through the rainclouds and fell on the children, lighting up half a face, or the top an ear. It made the gold crosses on their pale necks flash. Then it shifted and broke, streaming through the cracks in the dark gray sky and played off the tips of reaching fingers. It turned the baseball bat white as it cut through the air.

A girl stepped into the pit and all the kids started yelling in Russian, trying to get her to swing one way, or the other, but she just stood there while the head of John the Baptist swayed above her. I swear to god she was listening to it move. She bent her knees slightly, wrapped her fingers around the bat and swung. The bat came down across his left eyebrow and split the head diagonally. Candy rained down around her and the kids started squealing.

"My kind of religion," said Tamara.

The tall fat boy with the Ozzy patch jumped at the battered Prophet and got hold of an ear. He yanked and tore off the back of the head. A few more pieces of candy fell out and he dove for them, leaving the Paper Mache skull shapeless on the ground.

I walked over and picked up the piece. I recognized the handwriting on the inside of the brain case. It was a personal note from a council officer at The Paleontological Society asking me to attend an event. I threw it down and kicked it.

Tamara and I began to walk. I folded the pillowcase up and stuck it in my bag. A large droplet of water splashed down on my scalp. Then another.

“Here it comes again,” she said, but we didn’t walk any faster.

“That’s something I’d remember,” I wiped water out of my eyes, “If I was a kid. It would stay with me until the day I died. Do you think they knew whose head it was?”

“No. I don’t think they cared.”

“Would it have been better if I told them, do you think?”

“Probably not. By the way, I really liked the thumbtack eyes.”

“Thanks, I enjoyed pushing them in.”

“And the junk mail hair.”

“That was fun too.”

“Was your diploma in there?”

“No. I cut it up and gave it to a toddler who wanted to color.”

Tamara giggled. I noticed that broken incisor again.

When we got on the bus we were drenched. Tamara buried her chin in her coat.

“You should come out to the Farm,” she said, “Stay with us for a while. It’d be good for you to get a break from the city.”

“Yeah, I heard you got goats.”

Tamara laughed, “That too,” she said, “But more importantly people we have people who think like you do. There’s a bunch of us out there. You should really come.”

Tamara got off at the next stop. I watched her shrink as the bus rumbled down Colony of the Elect Boulevard.

All the way home, I hummed a song that Grace had taught me as a child. About soldiers, and sailors, and the shining North Star.

