

ZAZEN

16—The Breath of Soldiers

The next day the air smelled like pulverized asbestos and sulfur. The windows were still draped in black sackcloth and media storm still electrified anything that conducted it, channels, digital streams, sound waves, but for no reason at all, Jimmy was on the steps of her apartment smiling like she'd won a pie contest.

“Guess who I got a call from?”

Nero?

“I have no idea,” I said.

“Your mom.”

“Grace called you?”

“Yep. Credence gave her my number.”

She grinned and played with her cord necklace

“Yeah,” she said, “We had a great talk.”

“Is that thing made of hemp?”

“What?”

“That necklace.”

“This? I think so. Anyway, Grace invited me out to some kind of anniversary you all are having in a couple of days.”

The uncomfortable quiet spreads like parachute silk.

“Look,” I said, after a few seconds, “I’m not even sure I’m going to that thing.”

She stopped playing with her necklace. Her cheeks reddened. She looked down sharply. I had embarrassed her.

“Look, Jimmy—“

“Well, it’s too late,” she said, standing but not looking at me, “I already told Grace I would come. I promised to bring a vegan desert.”

Grace hates veganism. Says it’s an elitist dietary enclave for white people to lie to themselves about their role in the cycle of consumption.

“Call her back. Tell her you have to work.”

“I got the day off. You know if you don’t want me this close to you, you should say it right out.”

“It’s not you...exactly, it’s just that I think it’s a pretty bad idea right now, to go out there, with everything going on and all—”

Jimmy straightened, took a breath and let her shoulders drop. She looked up at me and waited. Because she is a direct person. Her eyes fall plainly on the world. And who was I to try to protect anyone? Doorman to the Onslaught? What the fuck! Sure. Come on in! There always room at a wake. They’re baking ham; they’re filling cups, and anyway I’m not a human shield.

“Okay,” I said.

But later that night I snuck back and left a note.

The downstairs door of her apartment building was propped open with a brick. I thought I heard Katydid in the bushes as the door swung closed but it couldn’t have been. I stepped into the black hallway. The carpet smelled like smoke. I crept up the creaking stairs to her apartment. There was no light under her door. Jimmy doesn’t like to use electricity. She says all this is just a war for resources and she doesn’t want any part of it. I listened and didn’t hear anything. Amber light from the lamps came through the window at the other end of the hall.

I pulled a sheet of paper out of my notebook.

It wasn’t fair to let someone you cared about walk into all your personal history. I knew Jimmy was expecting something wonderful, the proof of some fantasy she had about who we all were, Credence, Miro, Grace, me, having know each of us peripherally for years. But all families are crazed in their own a way. They all have different visions of what should be and isn’t. And it’s like the Snow Queen’s glass, once it’s in you, you can’t dig it out and it warps everything you see.

I sat down on floor by her apartment door and wrote her a letter:

Dear Jimmy:

My mom and dad have always believed that you should face hard things head on. That’s how they taught the three of us, Credence, Cady and me. In case you didn’t know,

Cady and Credence were twins. She was the one holding my mothers other hand that day in Redbird Square when the people were chanting and I was scared and wrapped myself in mom's wool coat (Have I ever told you that when you smile you remind me of her?). Credence was on Dad's shoulders.

On the anniversary of her death mom decorates the house with pictures of Cady and drawings she made. She makes Cady's favorite food, Frito Pie, and we tell stories about how she was. That's the anniversary. It's really more of an eternal funeral. Would you still like to come?

Let me know,

Della.

There had been a big debate. We held a family council about it when I was twelve. Should we celebrate Cady on her birthday or on the day of her death? The argument split along these lines:

Celebrating Cady on her Birthday—All the obvious reasons.

Celebrating Cady on the Anniversary of her death—People hide the sad things in the world from their sight. Bury their grief in commemorative stamps and, refusing to face the pain of their loss, devalue everything around them. They act like there's just one piece missing when what is missing was a part of everything. That's what it was like when Cady was gone. So we decided to mark the day she left us because that's when it all changed. For me, it could have been any day.

I folded the note for Jimmy and slipped it under the door.

There was a whirr of trees when the bus went off the cliff. I put my hand against the glass and green blurry streaks raced beneath my fingers. I imagine her in the thorny arms of wild blackberries singing. Mom used to say that we should look sadness right in the eye. I look Cady right in the eye, my older sister thirteen and crying, tangled in metal. I cannot turn away. **Cady Elizabeth Mylinek** *You are always welcome at any gathering...019791993.13.*

I lay back on the carpet in front of Jimmy's door. All I heard was the wind pressing against the windows. I was thinking; it's like a castle. Outside it's so

dark that even armies sleep next to each other, all dreaming of tomorrow's war. I was sure if I got up and went back down to the street I would hear nothing but owls and the breath of soldiers.

"How did they meet?" Jimmy asked me once, "Your parents."

"Dad came here on an academic visa. He'd been in the Paris student movement before that. They met at the library."

"Seriously? The library? That's so your mother."

"She was in there every day researching the history of regional water rights. It was very romantic."

"I'm sure it was," she laughed.

"No. Really. It was. Miroslav and Grace. They were the hot couple of the underground New Left. No doubt about it."

Lying in the hallway that night I saw my mother like she was there. Her hair was the color of honey and her eyes were the color of rich earth. Grace. She was wearing a blue cotton blouse and on it were land use maps, hearing dates and statistics from the Water Bureau. Across her body, rivers flowed. They poured over property lines and carved canyons from unclaimed lands. I traced those waters with my fingertips from source to delta making circles in the air and slept that night in the hallway with all of us together, Grace, Cady and me, safe in some part of an old castle that only we knew about.

When I woke up the next morning, I was clear. I crossed the river, which was lit up by small fires along the banks. In my bag, were the remaining rat family cell phones.

I went to the Central Transit station. It was full of displaced workers, thrown from their schedules by the bombings and scrambling to adjust. I sat down on a long bench in a crowd of people and pulled out the phones, laying them next to me. Busses came and went. I picked up the grape cell phone belonging to Jupiter Rodere and set it aside without turning it on. Saturn, Poseidon and Uranus I switched on and programmed to call-forward to their targets. Then I sent them off on different busses and walked two blocks north to a busy shopping plaza.

My whole life I had held back. There is a part of me that clings to the historical out of fear and never, never, had I actually walked into my own room, never felt my own skin. Standing in the shopping plaza, waiting for the right moment to test the great miracle, I knew that. When that moment came, I threw myself into the arms of an invisible collective. With all my heart, I leapt after the sea lion.

I called in The Happy Day Corporate Charity Center first because I felt the hand of Jupiter should strike it dead directly. Lightning bolts of hate. Then I called the strawberry cell phone, Saturn, which call forwarded to the Oldies Station, KGOD and told them they were going to be bombed. I didn't explain past that. I figured that if they had to ask, they wouldn't have understood. Next was the blueberry cell, Poseidon. It forwarded to the Central Library. Then Uranus, which hit the Cine-Tower. I did it fast then threw the Jupiter phone into the flatbed of a passing truck. I crossed back over the river. On the water, the city upon the hill wavered, an inverted reflection, and broke into scallops of stuttering light as the sun set.

I went to de-paving party once and watched people tear up a parking lot. I cried and cried because I'm a sap and it was so fucking hopeful I felt ashamed to even be there. I never let myself believe things like that can happen, but I finally had to admit that, hidden in my scientist's mind, was a dancehall I kept shuttered. The prettiest fossils are worthless. I'd forgotten. All the important material eaten by crystals. That what I felt like was happening to me.

The first I heard of the new fires was from a woman walking her dog. She said, stay away from downtown. Three more bombs had gone off. I asked her if anyone was hurt. She said no. It was miracle.

Over the next twenty-four hours more fires started. Some of it was organized and some of it was just kids throwing Molotov cocktails. And no one was hurt. I know. I asked. Several times, and not just the same person. They all said Milagro! Milagro! and I broke open like a geode. I thought of this guy I knew whose gratitude practice was centered on appreciating every object from the day it comes into his possession until the dystopic collapse of society. Vacations (soon nobody's going to be going anywhere, man), new cars

(what the hell, we'll all be walking before long), guitars (how else are we going to have music without electricity) the guy was Zen master. And now I walked in the golden autumnal light thinking he was more right than not.

I stopped by Rise Up Singing and listened, for a while, to the coverage with everyone else, huddled around the kitchen radio. The Happy Day Corporate Center was decimated. Boxes of irregular NIKE shoes melting like butter. KGOD went down, a burning bush, a sign for all to see. Look! A new star in the heaven under which we shall find the baby—oh, maybe not. What's all this charred cinder block? The Cine-Tower, a lighthouse, a beacon on a hill.

The last thing I heard about were the two AM radio towers south of town. They exploded like timed fireworks, dancing around like sparklers on the Fourth of July. It was it was a beautiful thing about the towers but there was only one problem. I hadn't called them in. The AM radio towers were on my original target list, not on my working one. They were alone, out on the border of town and I'd decided there was no point calling them in because there was no one there. I'd crossed them off my list days before.

But they were burning all the same.