

ZAZEN

17—The Avalanche Cabin

Grace said she wanted all of us out at the house by early afternoon. But it soon became clear that we'd be lucky to make it by dinnertime. Large sections of the city were cordoned and there were checkpoints on all the major roads out of town. We followed the traffic advisories all morning. Everything was backed up.

Annette offered to let us ride with them but I wanted to take Jimmy's truck. That way we could go if things got too intense.

I was standing on the sidewalk when Jimmy pulled up with a freshly baked vegan pineapple-lemon cake on the seat beside her. Apparently her response to local bomb attacks is to bake and talk about Honduran pottery collectives.

"I'm really interested in the way cooperative micro-economies...blah, blah, community kiln fire ... regional glazing techniques... the hue comes from wood smoke..."

—Good. We'll need potshards. That way it'll be easier for future archeologists to reconstruct our civilization—

"By the way, I found a book on Honduran Geology."

She smiled brightly and handed it to me. I stuck it in my bag. By then I had practically promised I was going down to meet her there, if in no other way but that I had never stopped her when she talked about what we could do, or resisted when she hinted at a longer relationship. And because of that, more and more, she relaxed when she talked of our potential future, qualifying it only out of manners.

"...then we would definitely head for the mountains. If you come, I mean."

She was going on about a friend she had in Tegucigalpa who said he could meet me at the airport, and how cheap it was to get around now because of all the hurricanes. Through the jungle vine I saw her, Queen of the Jaguars, twirling in a ball gown sewn by harpy eagles and howler monkeys.

It was noon before we actually got on the road. The first checkpoint we hit was easy. We told them we were going shopping and they waved us on. At the second checkpoint they made us kill the engine and show identification. They opened up our cooler and poked around in the ice but that was it.

Past the security rings, traffic flowed evenly through a colony of gas stations, day labor agencies and fast food drive-thrus. Kids sold flowers out of white plastic buckets and flagpoles went by like jail bars.

The original plan was to stay on the phones with Credence and Annette and hook up at a rest area outside of town. But the cell reception was already sticky and it didn't look like that was going to happen. We were out of range before they left.

Driving through the barricades and idling vehicles of my own deathless Rapture, I felt like a kid, back before I knew everything, back when sleeping sunburned in a pup tent or running barefoot through the dewy grass was still reality. That old feeling came and went. Alongside it though, other thoughts unfolded.

All the bombs sites except two, the KGOD radio towers and a check-cashing place near the airport, were on my final target list. The check-cashing place was probably random, just someone taking the opportunity, but I knew the towers came off the draft map. The obvious person was Tamara but she wasn't the only possibility. The kitchen at Rise Up Singing was a hotbed of aimless political fervor. Everyone who ever worked there stayed on the sub list, coming and going as they pleased. I knew people who shopped solely in Coworker Franklin's walk-in. I could see any number of them gleefully detonating a homemade bomb. But they would have left a trail of mangled pedestrians, I was sure of it. In some way it always came back to Tamara or people she knew.

The Head of John the Baptist swung tethered to a tree.

Jimmy picked up speed on the interstate and the truck rattled. The speedometer was broken so she could only tell how fast we're going by sound.

On the outskirts of town, buildings, mini-malls and franchises went from a stream to a stutter with flashes of field in between. I rolled down the window. A crop of satellite dishes went by all facing the same way like

sunflowers. We passed a warehouse with a thirty-foot spinning cell phone on top of it. After that, it was nothing but grassland.

I curled up on the vibrating seat with my arm around the pineapple-lemon cake and slept. When Jimmy woke me I thought for a second that I was fourteen and that she was Credence and I'd passed out again.

"Which exit do I need?"

"This one."

We turned west and the sun cut across Jimmy's cheek and thigh. Climbing into the wooded foothills the road dipped and curved under a belt of blue sky. The forest had been logged several times and all the trees had been planted in rows and were the same age, each trunk the size of a telephone pole. They made avenues of filtered light that appeared and disappeared as we drove. On the left was a gravel forest service road and we took it. A tall thin waterfall and a hazy valley flickered by. Then there was nothing but trees, green ditches and fallen branches on either side. Jimmy hit a pothole and we lurched forward.

"Go ahead and park," I said, "We can go the back way."

Jimmy pulled over. I got the cake.

Just off the road was an abandoned cabin. An avalanche wiped it out in the 1930s.

"The trail picks up just past this place," I said.

We walked into the clearing. The wood walls of the cabin were bright gray and warped. The back half of the roof was caved in. The front door lay rotting in the weeds.

"Come on," I led her onto the porch, "I'll show you the inside. Credence and I used to come here when we were kids."

The floor was covered with dry leaves. A small breeze came up and they scraped across the pine. It was all one room inside.

We took a few more steps. The couches were littered with cedar shingles. I could feel her breath on my shoulder. A strip of light, from where the roof had caved, fell diagonally across the kitchen counter. A forgotten glass bowl sparked in the sun.

"It's going to be strange to leave," Jimmy said.

Intentions blowing everywhere like dandelion seeds.

“Are you going to talk to them about it after dinner?” she asked.

“Probably not.”

“What do you think they’ll say?”

Through the hole in the roof I saw a hawk dive.

“See the hawk?”

She looked up. Her face was half shadowed and half lit. Tiny golden hairs played on upper lip. I slid right behind her while she was watching the hawk, put my mouth to her ear and whispered, “Let’s leave tonight when they’re all asleep.”

She thought I was joking but I meant it. I don’t know where I thought we would go. Everything was already so messed up.

We hiked up the trail behind the avalanche cabin. The forest changed as we went. It aged and became dense. Deer’s Head Orchids and Fairy Slippers slept all around and soon we could no longer see the cabin or the clearing or the rest of the trail down behind us. The trees grew irregular and roots twisted under our feet. At the top of the ridge the land leveled but was still wet. We walked on a pathway made of 2x8 planks lain over the black sucking mud. Mushrooms and wildflowers lined the soil and grew out of rotting tree trunks. All around rag lichen hung like lace.

“I’m really looking forward to seeing your parents,” said Jimmy “I always wished I’d known them better.”

The house was before us. There was a wind chime on the porch I had never seen. I reached up to touch it and just before I did, Grace opened the door, her dark hair streaming over her shoulders and down her blue dress. In her hand she held a spiral notebook and from each strong and facile finger a tiny creek flowed.

“Della,” she said.

Her face was inches from mine. I could smell her skin. She had cocoa butter on her lips. When she kissed me I felt the print. She touched my head.

“Jimmy,” she turned and her eyes changed to yellow in the sun, “It’s wonderful to have you.”

I saw Jimmy on the edge of a circling current.

“Miro will be back soon,” she said, “Annette called. They just left.”

I reached back for Jimmy’s hand, “Credence told me they were giving him a hard time about taking the day off,” I said.

“Oh whatever. That union wants to be the vanguard but they just keep leaching the life out of people.”

We followed her in.

“I’m not saying they do bad things...” she passed through the front door pulling a rubber band off the knob and wound her hair in a loose ponytail, tobacco strands playing by her cheeks, “I mean they’re willing to create a dialogue on class but...”

We walked into the kitchen and Grace stepped into a flood of sunlight. She leaned back against a butcher’s block, unbuttoned the top of her blue dress and pulled the rubber band back out of her hair. A plane scratched a path in the sky. She watched it out the window then threw her head forward and shook it. Hair, streaked with copper cascaded around her ears and she put it back into a ponytail and stood up. Her face was flushed and there was sweat on her forehead and under her eyes.

“They just aren’t all they think they are,” she said “Too orchestrated. Too mired in Party structure.”

She wiped a drop of sweat from her temple with the inside of her wrist

“So, Jimmy,” she said, “Credence tells me you’re going to Honduras.”

“Jimmy,” I said, “The garden out back is beautiful. Come on, I’ll take you.”

Grace uncorked the wine, “Where is it you’re going?”

“I’m flying into Tegucigalpa but going to the mountains.”

Grace handed her a glass of white wine.

“What made you decide to leave?”

I grabbed Jimmy’s hand, “You should really see the garden before it gets too dark. It’s prettiest with all the western sun.”

Jimmy pulled her hand back. She thought the conversation might be an opportunity for me to tell Grace I was leaving, or at least prepare her. It wasn’t. I knew.

“Come on, really,” I tugged on her wrist.

“I don’t know, Grace” she said, ignoring me, “I don’t feel like there’s much more I can do here and I really don’t want to be a part of what’s going on.”

Grace brushed hair out of her face, paused then wiped the sink. She listened to Jimmy chatter about native cultures, indigenous medicine, artisan craft movements, and maybe because Jimmy’s gay, or because it was the anniversary, I don’t know, but Jimmy got a pass. I saw the decision get made. The faintest exhale, the smallest movement of an eyelid. Jimmy saw nothing, rambling and chittering. Grace watched her as if she were a pretty tangerine bird. She waited for her finish, her flaming eyes dancing over the feathers until they caught fire.

“So then you won’t be staying for the rise of the proletariat?” Grace said.

“I’d only be cooking for rich white people anyway.”

“You could always industrialize,” Grace refilled Jimmy’s wine glass, “You know, get a job stunning chickens in a factory to earn the trust of the working class.”

Jimmy laughed and accidentally spat Chablis on my legs.

“It’s a pretty silly idea, isn’t it?” said Grace, getting a rag “Leaping out of the closet in a crisis?”

She lowered her voice “Don’t worry, sir. I’m a revolutionary socialist. Everything’s going to be okay.”

Jimmy covered her mouth with her arm so she wouldn’t spit on me again. Grace smiled. That’s how I love her. My fearless Grace, my broken shield.

“Anyway,” she said, “It’s stupid. Who is going to run the healthcare system if everyone’s picking grapes or on a tractor?”

She hung the rag over the faucet.

“That’s why in the end I always thought what Della did was smart, deciding to stay in school.”

Grace poured a glass of water and looked up, the light on her face.

