

ZAZEN

18—Grace Mountain

Pink evening sun came through the attic window.

“Watch your head,” I said.

Jimmy climbed the ladder behind me. Grace waited below.

“Don’t forget the Rainbow Brite dolls,” she called.

Grace keeps all of Cady’s things in a crib so that no one ever forgets to whom she really belonged. Stuffed rabbits, snap-on black leather bracelets with metal studs, half-used hair dye—Enchanted Forest and Electric Lava—black nail polish, a plastic record player, Mutant Ninja Turtle stickers, jewelry boxes, candles, incense, a Bauhaus poster, a Walkman, cassettes. If you glued it all together it wouldn’t look like Cady, though. Like when you look at fossils and think the world must have been nothing but seashells but it wasn’t. It was filled with all sorts of things that didn’t preserve.

“What’s going to happen now?” Jimmy asked.

“Not much. We’ll put some of Cady’s stuff up, play her music. Make some toasts. We’ll be out of here by midnight. I promise.”

From the rafters, dried Indian corn hung. When we were little we used to pretend we were at the battle of Wounded Knee. I never got to be a warrior, though. Cady and Credence were always the warriors and I got stuck being one of the babies left to die on the hillside. Cady would make speeches of vengeance over my body and Credence would draw plans for a counter attack. If I moved, Cady would kick me. Hard. I broke some ribs once doing fieldwork at grad school and what struck me was how familiar the feeling was. I remember thinking it was lucky Cady didn’t puncture a lung cause if I’d ratted her out she would have had me shot. That’s how it was. We were all in training.

Through the window I saw Credence and Annette walking up the path.

“We should probably just take the whole thing downstairs,” I said.

We dragged the crib into the dining room. Grace set out chips and guacamole while Credence and Annette caught her up on the riots. People were still holed up at Higher Ground of Africa negotiating with the city.

Credence was trying to get the unions to pressure the mayor but they were trying to get him reelected and didn't want him chastised over police accountability. Community leaders were split. What solution was to be had? What mystical action could convey both rage and passivity? Candlelight vigil! Credence was trying to act excited.

Miro walked in. The Lost Fish of the Morava, he swam muscled and aging, his scales like silver coins fell and glinted between the rocks. Something was wrong. His frayed fins beat the water. He laid a newspaper down in front of Grace.

"They're tightening the borders," he said.

Miro put his huge hand on Credence's shoulder. Grace glanced at headlines then poured some salsa into a bowl.

"Sounds like you're going to get out just in time, Jimmy," she said.

I could feel Jimmy's eyes boring a hole in the side of my skull. Annette saw too and asked Jimmy to help her in the kitchen.

Grace flipped through the newspaper.

Credence and I went over to the crib and began poking around. Miro was already going through it. Every year we each chose something of Cady's to put out. Some things always go up. The dried wildflowers she collected the summer before eighth grade and ironed between sheets of wax paper. Her tape deck and the cassettes with her name written in nail polish on the plastic shells. I went through those. I found a copy of *Pretty Hate Machine* missing its cover. Cady and I were singing "Head Like a Hole" on the bus the day she died. She said it was "got money" and I said it was "god money" and she called me an idiot and went to sit with some friends up front. Then she ran back crying because Jeremy Sokolov called her fat and she had a big crush on him. It just about killed me seeing her like that so I ran up and whacked him with my knapsack. Then we went off the cliff. All three kids in the very back were killed. I remember Cady like a magical animal with sharp lines and multi-colored fur. I knew she would call me a coward for even thinking about leaving.

Miro held up a clay dog.

"She made this at camp, right?"

“I hate that thing,” I said, “She used to tell me it came to life at night and that the only reason it hadn’t ripped my throat out was because she had asked it not too. Goddamned death hound.”

“Yes,” Miro smiled, “I think it’s exactly that,” and set it on the end table.

“Here it is,” said Credence and unrolled the huge Bauhaus poster.

We spread it out on the floor and put books on the corners to hold it flat. Cady’s face, soft with her baby fat floated up before me. She had thick black eye make-up smeared on her pink and freckled cheeks.

Credence grabbed some of Cady’s black nail polish out of the crib and Grace took the plastic record player. I picked out a drawing Cady made when she was about six. There were some burning apartment buildings and everyone standing over a little dead bird. On the bottom it says “Africa.” Cady drew herself too, big as a skyscraper, right next to the little bird. I laid it next to the clay demon dog.

Jimmy came back from the kitchen. Annette must have warned her. She wasn’t saying much. I didn’t blame her. What do you say at a funeral? Or wear to a hanging? Or a bus crash or a school bombing? Nikes? A Flak jacket woven from pieces of the true cross?

“How bad is this going to get?” she whispered.

“Probably not so bad.”

Grace put Rainbow Brite dolls on the shelves and tables. She tried to balance a couple over the door but the molding was too narrow and they fell off.

“Cady would kill you if she knew you were putting those dolls up,” I said.

“I know,” said Grace, “It helps me to see her face.”

I heard the sea shift in her voice.

Miro taped the Bauhaus poster to the door and put the little clay dog on my dinner plate. I threw a napkin over it. Credence painted his nails black in the doorway. I propped my drawing up between some glasses. We used the turntable on the plastic record player like a Lazy Susan and put the salsa and sour cream on it. Annette put the Frito Pie on the table and Miro poured the

wine. Then we all sat down. Credence blew on his nails to dry the polish. Annette looked like she'd rather be chained to a fence. Jimmy shifted in her seat and bowed her head slightly. The windows were open and outside the woods were filled with small sounds, sparrows and quivering tree needles. We always start with silence. It's my favorite part because it feels like Cady's there, like she's upstairs and lost track of time and might come down to dinner any minute.

Then Grace rose from the table like a Tsunami. With her breath, she washed away the debris of the past until we were all floating in her massive sorrow, buoyed by her absolute conviction in life, vibrant and wild on the shores, she carried us forward and that's how we landed, all of us on this strange beach.

"It is a wonderful thing," Grace said with her glass held high, "To raise a free child. To Cady!"

She drank then slammed the glass down. The wine splashed out on all sides and reddened the tablecloth.

"To Cady!" We yelled and drank and slammed our glasses down like Grace.

It was my turn and I stood.

"It is a wonderful thing to have a true sister!" I shouted, "To Cady!" and slammed my glass down.

Jimmy jumped up to get some rags from the kitchen. I saw her minutes later in the doorway with her hands full of surgical gauze. But by then Credence was making his toasts. She started laying down the dishtowels. Miro went next and Jimmy scrambled to sop the wine that was pooling under the plastic record player. Then Grace went again, and on and on until the tablecloth was a field of crimson flowers and Jimmy could find no more towels and we were all hoarse. Cady the bold. Cady the poet. Cady the fighter. Cady the argumentative. Cady the strident. Cady the gentle. Cady the unsure. Cady the secret crier. Cady the awkward. Cady the valiant. Cady the private...

Finally no words; there aren't any really. I was breathless. Jimmy was crying. And even though it was silent, I knew my parents were talking because

they never stop. Grace is a Tsunami and Miro is radio signal and they speak in waves punctuated by dolphins and sea glass.

Miro left the room and came back with an orange guitar with hummingbirds on it. He brushed the back of his hand down the strings, adjusted the tuning and did it again. I didn't recognize the song at first. It was one of Cady's favorites and it came to me again as I watched him—Miro is a radio signal. He arpeggiated a chord with his leathered hands and I thought—these sounds have traveled across a galaxy to get to me. And my last thought was, the singer's been gone for years.

Learning lines in the rain...Jimmy put her hand on my knee...The graveyard scene, The Golden Years... my hand over hers...She's in Parties... And Miro, the lost fish of the Morava snapped his torn tail and bubbles, filled with strains of Czech lullabies, shot upwards, each for Cady.

We all have our mother's mouth and our father's cheekbones, sharp and high. I have my grandmother's lighter hair. It turns blonde in the sun and when I was at Davis nobody believed it had ever been brown.

Credence has dark hair and dusky skin just like Cady did. Even now, in the Fall, there's rose on his cheeks. They both had blue eyes but Credence has a dark spot in his left iris. Someone told me that those are trauma scars and not genetic. I don't know if that's true. Eyes change over time though just like rivers and it would make sense if every place we'd been, everywhere that counted, left behind a meander scar.

Grace cut the Frito Pie.

"It's nothing but meat and cheese," I whispered to Jimmy.

"Shut up," she hissed.

The skin under her eyes was swollen.

Grace came over and tucked a long piece of Jimmy's hair behind her ear.

"How are you doing with all this?" she asked.

"It's pretty sad, Grace," Jimmy said.

"Yes. It is sad," Grace put her hand lightly on the back of Jimmy's head, "But it is important to remember that we have always had our political

martyrs.”

Grace reached across and pulled two grapes off a dense cluster in the center of the table.

“What do you mean?” Jimmy asked.

A veil came down between Credence and the rest of the world—thin, shimmering, nearly invisible, and he withdrew. And Miro, like a man waving in the distance at a passing ship, smiled to no one, setting a piece of buttered bread on the edge of Grace’s plate.

Grace squinted her eyes.

“It was a failure on my part,” she said “Cady never really did understand the role that gender played.”

She sat back down and took a bite out of the buttered bread.

“I don’t understand,” said Jimmy.

“You see Cady understood class and race. She was very good on those points. She had a wonderful critical mind but she did not understand gender. Her grasp of feminism was tentative and that’s where I slipped. You see she didn’t have the tools to protect herself from gender-based criticism—she didn’t know how to let what that boy said roll off her. If she had had those tools, she wouldn’t have run to the back of the bus.”

Annette looked down at her plate and shook her head. Jimmy put her fork down.

“We have to learn from our mistakes,” she continued, “I know you, more than anyone at the table, must understand the importance of gender. Della’s always been pretty clear on that too. But I underestimated it. We are nothing if we can’t face our own past with clear eyes, no matter how much it hurts. I take full responsibility for what happened to Cady.”

Then Grace picked up the empty bowl and walked into the kitchen to get more salsa, trailing behind her the harpoons and tangled rigging of a terrible storm.