

ZAZEN

20—Dancehall

Mirror said she'd pick up the dental dams and lube herself. She sounded annoyed. I was in the kitchen of Rise Up Singing listening to reports of a new string of fires when she called. The radio was up loud so I couldn't tell what she was saying at first. She wanted to know if I had everything?

"Everything what?"

"The dams and lube."

I vaguely remembered promising to get them days earlier.

"I forgot. Sorry."

"Dude, don't fuck up my party. Ben Hur Playland is going to close in half an hour."

"Right. If it hasn't already been gutted by a wall of roaring flame."

"Whatever—do me a favor at least, go outside and see what's happening."

I walked out of the back of the restaurant and around the corner. I leaned against the mural of the smiling black woman in the Pan-African headdress.

"Okay, I'm there."

"What do you see?"

"Black smoke covering everything."

"Everything?"

"Well, mostly the south and southwest parts of town."

"What about east?"

"Clear."

"Fucking God loves me better than anyone. Call Ben Hur. Tell them not to close. I'm on my way."

Nobody knew where the party was going to be held. Just that it was in a warehouse somewhere, probably in the industrial district. It went this way: if you had an invitation it told you to go to a website where you logged on as a guest. You didn't need to give your name but you had to say who gave you the

invite and write a few sentences about your current sexual fantasy. Once you were vetted, you entered a contact number. On the day of the party everyone would get three text messages. The first would say if the party was on or not. The next message would give a thirty-minute warning and the last would have where to go for the pick-up. There were four meeting points and you had to get there fast. The party was going to cap at 150 people. Not everyone was going. Common logic was that if you made it to a site within half an hour, you were going but anything after that was guesswork. The drivers who ferried people up to the party were all in contact with each other and kept a close head count.

I got the first message earlier in the day around 2pm. I was watching footage of bomb-sniffing dogs running through more Pho places when it came in.

It said: *Yes like Yoko...*

I hadn't committed to going. It might be kind of sad without Jimmy. The sex party itself felt like a reaction to a world that no longer existed, a Victorian ghost floating through the mustard gas.

I didn't call Ben Hur Playland like Mirror asked. Instead, I watched smoke rise over the southern part of the city. Down along the river where it bent towards the sea I stared at the coastline like some kind of mystical destruction was about to take place, like we could turn the corner on the Grand Ravage right then and take it by surprise. West, toward the Roseway Bridge, the candlelight marchers were gathering. With the cloud cover gone it was going to get colder. Soon they would cross the river. In my mind I saw them line up. I saw them light candles, one to another down the row, cupping their hands to keep them from going out. I felt the Bird Crickets perched on the grass hill waiting for the march to move, jerking and cocking their heads. When it got dark and the emergency lamps turned on, I headed toward the bridge thinking that I could catch up with the march. It was just over a mile away and they would be moving slowly. I began to run. Alongside me the molten pennies in the Rat Queen's fur radiated.

A quarter of a mile before the bridge the crickets had set up a barricade. I went south for a few blocks and saw that it stretched down to the

cemetery. To the north it ran to the cement wall of the freeway. They had cordoned off the whole area. The marchers had no way to retreat and I couldn't get to them.

My phone beeped. It was the second message.

Soon it all starts anew.

Throughout New Honduras people dressing for the party. I wondered for a second if Tamara would be there. Mirror said she might stay. If she had, I wanted to see her and ask her about my map and what the hell she thought she was doing.

Behind me I heard a bullhorn. There was a sweep coming, about a block up. I saw Bird Crickets fanned out in full gear. I had the map and the last of the Hive phones in my bag. I looked around me for a place to stash it but it was all houses with clipped yards and ugly little rock gardens. There was nothing that was overgrown. I began walking fast, first south again, then southeast, ducking through the side streets and listening for the rustles of riot gear. A couple of times beams of light fell across sidewalks I had just walked over. They were moving in a wide semi-circle and I could feel it start to close.

My phone beeped again. It was the third text message.

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows...

27 NE Everest / 988 SE Markan Dr / 10031 SW Torrent / 2847 NW Gillahan Rd

I was eleven blocks from NE Everest. I ran. The police lines hadn't closed yet and I made it through. Outside the perimeter it was dark and silent. There was no way for me to get home and no way for me to cross the river. If the Roseway Bridge was cut off, the South Bridge was too. I walked the remaining blocks to the pick-up site with my messenger bag pulled tight around me and my head and face down.

The pick-up site was a middle school playground. People were milling about under a covered basketball court. Maybe thirty or forty of them, all made of glass with flames dancing on their backs. I recognized some of them, a couple of neighborhood bike mechanics, some girls from the co-op, a guy that collected and sold scrap metal and his friend who was supposedly some big eco

terrorist. The woman who ran the tattoo shop was talking with two guys I knew from way back. One had gotten totally into urban biodynamic farming and I thought the other one was dead. Someone told me that, years ago. Meningitis.

The first driver pulled up and people surrounded his van. He said they were getting through. That the cops had closed off certain sections but didn't have the numbers to really lock everything down. Too many officers were still out on the fires.

A second van pulled up behind the first and a third behind that. Most of us went in that first run. Some waited behind for friends who were still coming. I got into the third van with the girls from the co-op and the guy I thought was dead and we took off. We drove with our windows down and the lights off listening, feeling the city surrounding us as we passed.

The party was held at a warehouse next to a huge public utility building that had been abandoned for years. The land around it was so thoroughly poisoned by chemicals that the city had condemned it pending federal funds for clean up. They couldn't even get crews to work on demolition there.

Mirror was standing in front of the main warehouse door in a pink and black striped top, go-go boots and fishnets with a cut out crotch. All pink to match. She waved the drivers over to a lot and went back inside.

We parked and as I got out the girls from the co-op pushed past me and ran laughing over the gravel and dust to the warehouse. I found Mirror right inside the huge hanger door talking with someone in a kitty collar. They were going to raise the cap. There were already about a hundred people there. I waited until she was done then stepped in close to Mirror.

“You know this whole area is a roiling caldera of super toxins, right?”

“Fuck HAZMAT. It's not sexy.”

“Neither is cancer or respiratory failure.”

“Don't eat the dirt.”

Mirror grabbed another girl in a kitty collar who was passing by holding a basket full of bracelets.

“Pick a bracelet.”

The girl with the collar held the basket up and Mirror began digging through it.

“Red is all access, open to anything. Blue is hetero only. Pink is girl on girl—don’t say it, I’ve already gotten a rash of shit from the leather dykes—black is boy on boy, which doesn’t apply...Safety Orange means you just want to watch and probably shouldn’t be here anyway and you’re not wearing that one because I would never speak to you again if you did and...I guess that’s it. Red, blue or pink. Which is it?”

“Red,” I said and slipped the bracelet she handed me onto my wrist.

“Good girl,” Mirror nodded, “And if you get bored of being hit on by dudes you can always come back to the safe room and switch bracelets.”

Mirror let the girl with the kitty collar go and walked off in a different direction. I didn’t see her again for another two hours.

I walked into the safe room. It was filled with soft furniture low to the ground worn-out green couches and fraying velvet chairs. In the center was a dining table laid with tabouli, hummus, halvah, vegan cupcakes, tureens of carrot ginger soup, pomegranates, star fruit, bread, dark chocolate, raspberries, blueberries. Crystal punchbowls full of mango and papaya juices sat beside a decanter of cold mint tea and a pot of mulled cider on a camp stove.

People were hanging out eating. Some were taking a break from the growing intensity of the party and others were just freaked out by the whole thing. A girl beside a wedge of Brie was talking loudly about the other rooms and bragging about how she’d been out there several times already. Her hair was full of glitter and she looked like she had been crying.

To the left of the safe room was a large alcove with a gauze curtain. I saw a woman go in and I walked over. More and more people were coming in through the front and the sound was growing. I pressed myself back against the wall near the alcove. It was pitch dark behind the gauze but I knew they could see us. I could hear bodies moving. Someone laughed.

I spent the first part of the party on the edge of the safe room watching for Tamara. I wanted to ask her about my map directly, but after an hour I gave up and walked out of the safe room. I passed a room called “The Den,”

which was set up like a rec room with board games and mattresses all over the floor. I looked in for a second but it was mostly hippy guys in skirts snuggling with their bi girlfriends.

In the main room of the warehouse was a DJ. Mirror called it the Big Tent and had divided it into three rings, each reserved for serious BDSM play. Mirror warned me weeks ago that she was going to banish pretenders to the Den.

“Anybody wandering around in rubber PVC not doing anything is going to get it,” she said, “It’s not Stand and Model. I don’t want to see sorority girls in Pleather.”

As far as I could tell, there weren’t any. Mirror had painted the safe word, EXTREME on the cement floor of the warehouse, her own line in the sand, and it seemed to be working. In the first ring were five muscular gay men. Totally old school—real leather, metal cock rings—everything. Two of them at least were over fifty. They were breaking out the canes. It was the kind of thing most of us had never witnessed, something from old magazines, unassimilated pre-death sex. I saw Mirror walk by beaming.

The ring next to that was a gender-mixed role-play. I recognized one of the bottoms, a boy from a camp I taught at once. She was a girl then, Trina. Her parents were Christian hippies. They had a group house somewhere upriver and took in runaways. I knew some people who lived there for a while and said it was pretty cool, that they weren’t bad. Trina was a neat kid too but I liked her better as a boy. It seemed more natural. He was part of a role-play involving a police officer and a bad storeowner. He was the kid caught shoplifting. It was pretty wild. People started to gather and everything got super-electric, and with the audience getting into it so much, the players in the scene pushed more. Trina yelled for help and said he was innocent, but no one believed him.

In the last ring two men and a woman were doing Japanese rope torture. The woman moaned when the thin rope that ran between her legs was cinched tight and the top, a tall shirtless man who tied knots as delicately as if he were making lace, tugged on it again. The crowd let off a huge wave of energy.

Outside of the rings, on one side of the main room was straight-up orgy. There were some pillows thrown around and a rug but that was it. It was slow when I first came in but now it was really going. On the other side under a row of broken-out window the swings were set up. Mirror had painted sawhorses, a workbench and a rack bright primary colors so it would have a playground/construction site theme. Mitch was standing by the swings in a kitty collar with the liability paperwork.

The party was packed, easily closer to two hundred people and still more were coming. The synthetic glitch and hum of the music resonated in the huge warehouse and was absorbed by bodies. Ambient loops vibrated the rippled windowpanes. It was getting harder to move and hear. I felt my way through the crowd, asking anyone I could find in a kitty collar where Mirror was. Finally I found her talking to a couple of sullen fetish model types near the punchbowl in the safe room. She saw me and came over.

“Dude, the swings have snapped twice, half of my tops flipped because this whole town is just a bunch of fucking slaves,” she glared at the two girls by the punchbowl “You better have some good news for me.”

“Flipping roles can be sexy.”

“No. It’s not sexy when you have two totally passive bottoms trying to out-meeek each other. Not sexy at all. If I wanted that kind action I’d run a knitting café.”

“I was wondering if Tamara came.”

“Fuck no! That faggot split earlier today. If she hadn’t painted the sawhorses I’d never speak to her again. Oh,” she pulled an envelope out of a pink faux fur clutch, “She wanted me to give you this.”

Just then Mirror saw a pack of Goth chicks heading for the alcove.

“I got to go. There’s a No Bat Wings allowed policy in that room. Someone got stabbed by a wire earlier. I need to tell them to hang the wings by the door.”

She took several steps away then stopped.

“Della, you should check out the upstairs. You’d like it,” she grinned, “It’s called The Motel.”

Mirror disappeared into the darkened alcove and seconds later a girl with bat wings emerged, sulking.

I opened the letter.

Dear Salome,

I wish I could have stayed for the party but I should have been home days ago. Come to the Farm. There's a place for you here. I think you would like it.

xoxo,

Mara

Inside the directions were folded up into a little swan.

I unbraided my hair and shook it out. I had been waiting for something and not known what. Unpinned from all the things to which I was beholden—Grace in the hall of mirrors, Credence in the candlelight, Jimmy, the box-mall-church, the Head of John the Baptist—I felt my body like I owed it to no one. Loosening the strap on my bag, it fell to the ground and for the first time in forever I let everything slip. Soon I might be in a foreign country, or maybe in jail, but right then I was under that broken slab of concrete with everyone else.

Steam rose from people in the Big Tent condensed on the metal rafters then rained back down on the crowd. Raina was in the corner, her long auburn hair falling over her naked body, moving through her Vinyasa. Several people followed her and more were coming and going. She led the asanas, flowing through the warrior stances, lowering each time to the ground and arcing back then down again in a metered dance half-time to the industrial buzzing of the DJ loops.

I walked past them all and went up a narrow, metal stairway.

At the top was a door with the word MOTEL written in small black letters over the door handle. I opened it. A long carpeted hallway stretched ahead with rooms on either side. They must have been clerical offices a long time ago. Mirror had painted numbers on the doors. The one closest to the

stairway was empty and I could see in. There was a ratty bed, a chair and an end table with a lamp that gave off yellow light. Mirror put a Bible next to the lamp and covered the window with a dark sheet to block any light from outside.

I took a few more steps in. It was cold in the Motel. I could hear beds creaking and soft moaning. It was full of people. Down the hallway a woman cried out and I heard the door slam shut.

The hallway was dark. Some had kept their lights on and others had them off. At the end of the hallway there was a room with the door open and the light off. I went in.

A man was sitting in a chair.

“Claire?” he said and turned.

He couldn’t see me. The end of the hallway was black.

“No. Not Claire.”

He went back to looking out the covered window. Through the green flannel sheet the outline of Public Utility with its dormered windows and gabled roof could be seen. I walked over to him until the arm of the chair was pressed against the front of my thigh. His skin was pale and his chest smooth and I could see my breath under the dim light of the window. I wondered why he wasn’t cold. His hair looked black in the room and the way he said Claire sounded like he was from somewhere else.

“Are you Czech?” I asked.

“No. Russian.”

After a few minutes he stood up. We were inches apart. His skin smelled like wood oil. I felt for his wrist and pulled it towards me. He laughed. I held it to the faint light. A red bracelet dangled.

I liked the sound of his voice. The shape of his hip and the way his hairline feathered at the nape of his neck. I liked that he was tall. I liked the combination of being cold and then too hot but never warm and never any one feeling all over. Sometimes I saw people in the doorway, standing shadows. Then later they would be gone, as if they had been looking for something and found it. Other people came in at one point and I bowed out for some of it. I took my turn in the chair staring out the green window and sat like he had,

naked from the waist up, to see what it felt like and watched my breath dissolve in the muted light.

I stayed in there until daybreak. He was sleeping when I left. I wandered down the hallway and into another part of the building where there was a landing and a back staircase down to the main floor. Gray light came through the high windows of the warehouse. There were people everywhere tangled and twisted like a photograph of a crash site. Behind hanging blankets, some lamps were still lit and I heard groans and the movement of bodies.

I found my things and walked down another hallway constructed of corrugated tin to a make-shift kitchen where a sink was. It must have been a staging room of some sort. Pallets of bottled water were stacked in the corner and towels and First Aid kits sat on chairs beside them. I opened a bottle of water and walked out the back door down some rotted steps into a field of beaten yellow weeds. It was cooler again, but not raining.

There was a firepit several yards in front of me and I watched gray ashes, bright as stars, get swept upwards by the wind and fall to the ground, settling on the trampled grass. I took a seat on some cinder blocks near the back steps and looked up into the white sky.

The Russian man I had spent the past few hours with, Sasha, came down the steps and sat beside me. He had a tin can full of water and some pliers in his hand.

“Cowboy coffee. If I can get the fire going again.”

I handed him a Zippo I’d carried since I was a teenager.

“Use this.”

Sasha got the fire going and sat on his heels by the pit. He put a brick down in the center of the fire then set the can on top. Flames licked up around it. It felt like field camp. The air smelled like snow. There was a tree up against a fence and its limbs raked the sky.

“Do you have to work today?” I asked.

“Tomorrow. I teach high school. But I have to work on the lesson plan. We’re talking about those two boys who got shot last week in my humanities class.”

One side of the tin can in the fire was scorched black. Sasha used the pliers to turn it around. Then he took a plastic bag full of coffee from his coat pocket and poured it into the water.

“That’s pretty prepared.”

“I’m Russian, a flask in one hand, coffee in the other. I don’t leave these things to the hippies around me.”

He smiled like a soldier, the way you would at a stranger you passed.

“What are you going to say? How are you going to explain it?”

“Two kids about your age got shot to death because some dumb cop thought a Buzz Lightyear doll was a gun.”

I just kept looking at the sky. Then at Sasha’s black hair, his gray sweater, the poisoned industrial field, trampled and soaked, then back at the white, white sky.

“What do you think about all the bombs?” I asked.

“MANIFESTATION?” he laughed and pulled the coffee out of the fire then set the blackened can down on another brick “Doesn’t change much. More cute, I think, like commentary. Meaningless, really.”

He reached into his bag and pulled out a thick porcelain coffee cup. He dipped the cup into the boiled coffee and handed it to me.

“The fires will go out,” he said “New commentary will take their place.”

I drank Sasha’s coffee and looked at they sky. The tree behind him had such fine leaves on it that they seemed to belong to another tree all together. They were crumpled and the color of dried roses.

“I have to go,” he said “Do you have a pen?”

I found one that had slipped down into the torn lining of my coat. He squatted down in front of me and pulled my free hand toward him.

“This way you can always claim it washed away,” he said and wrote his number across my palm.

I looked at it several times that day. Each time I washed my hands, it faded more until it was only visible to me because I knew it had been there.

I was going to the Farm and I knew it.