

ZAZEN

Chapter 5—1 800 Buy COAL

The morning light on Jimmy's face showed all the tiny scars she had from being alive. Above her eye was a small white scar that pulled when she squinted and next to that, another scar, thin as a wrinkle from car wreck. Under her chin was a ragged patch of raised tissue from wiping out on a skateboard. She'd been too stubborn to go get it stitched because she didn't want to pay the ER bills.

I tried to move but her hair was tangled in my ring. I twisted it but couldn't get the ring off because my fingers were swollen from sleep. She was laughing the whole time, which made it harder. Finally, we had to cut the hair out with the scissors of her Swiss army knife.

"Not like matters," she said and threw the bleached orange lock behind her where it landed coiled and soundless.

The alarm went off and she jumped to get it then walked into the kitchen. I heard dishes clank as she pulled cups from the full sink. She called out asking if I wanted tea. Her voice echoed on the wood floorboards and in the short hallways.

I braided my hair naked in bed. I couldn't find my rubber bands so I made two pigtails and tied them together at the base of my neck. My red corduroy dress was across the room under a book on Historic Churches of Honduras. I pulled it out and slapped it against the carpet to get the wrinkles out. There were little pink bleach stains all over the front, which I hadn't noticed before. They started at my ribcage and went all the way to the bottom edge just above my knee.

I put it on and went into the kitchen. The sky was white through the windows. Rows of green seedlings and starts lined the windowsills, which dipped unevenly and had rounded edges from too many layers of paint. Jimmy pulled a kettle off the stove. I was already sorry I was there. A ladder of silk now spanned between us. Jimmy set a Japanese teacup in front of me and, with the windows all full of the blank white sky and everything in the kitchen so clear and sharp it looked like an unfinished painting, as if someone had

meticulously filled in the details of the room but forgotten to draw the world outside.

“Are you really thinking about leaving?” she asked.

“Maybe. Don’t know where I’d go.”

“You could stay with me in Honduras if you want, for a while anyway. I’m not going to stalk you or anything. I’m fine with whatever.”

Jimmy handed me some zucchini bread and I looked around like I had been born into that moment. Like I had been somewhere else all along. I saw the glittering incongruity. I was right in the center of it. It’s simple when you’re not clenching up and I was before but didn’t know it. At some point that morning the clenching stopped. There was really no reason I couldn’t leave.

Rise Up Singing was empty but the tables were full of dirty dishes. Mirror was throwing them into a black bus tub.

“Dude,” she said, “There was a fucking bike messenger convention here. It was the annual race and Franklin forgot to schedule a dishwasher. It totally sucked. They all wanted smoothies and like ten plates of nachos each. We’re out of rice, dude. Rice.”

I got a second tub.

“Are the checks in yet?” I asked.

“In the back. Franklin changed the work meeting. There’s a sign up.”

I went back and got my check. Above the time cards was a large piece of peach construction paper. It said:

OUT OF RESPECT FOR MIRROR’S UPCOMING EVENT AND CONCERNS ABOUT ATTENDANCE AT THE WORK MEETING I HAVE CHOSEN TO RESCHEDULE. WE WILL CLOSE EARLY SATURDAY THE 26TH AND MEET FOLLOWING BRUNCH. ALCOHOL AND VEGAN CUPCAKES PROVIDED.

—FRANKLIN

Coworker Franklin had taken the time to draw fleur-de-lis and devil heads around the edge of the paper.

I went back out. Mirror had a look of great satisfaction.

“Good for the sex party,” I said.

“Good for fucking Franklin,” she said and threw a heavy white dinner plate into a tub where it broke a pint glass, “I don’t know what he was thinking by scheduling the day after the party. There was totally going to be nobody there. Birds chirping. I’m not even sure we’d be done.”

Someone came in the front door, looked around and left.

“Good. I fucking hate people,” she said.

Mirror grabbed a spoon and started eating lentils off the line.

“Franklin’s changing the food policy,” she said with her mouth full of food, “He says we should pay for salmon because it’s so expensive. I told him he should pay for it by going to hell for serving it. I hope a two-thousand pound Coho haunts his fucking elder years.”

She dug around in a plastic container for some avocado slices.

“I was going to make the party vegan-only but I think it’s important to teach by example.”

Ed, Logic’s Only Son walked in and sat at the counter.

“Within reason,” she said and put a piece of avocado back into the container and sealed it.

I opened the check outside. My actual money was limited but my credit was not. I had a world of predatory lending to explore. Mail had been piling up for months at my PO Box and I knew there had to be credit card offers mixed in so I went and picked up two tubs of personal history.

I dumped them on the floor of my room. Letters from the Geology department at UC Davis fanned across the carpet. There was one from my advisor urging me to apply for a position and another from an ex-boyfriend who’d read my dissertation thought it was hot and wanted my number. There were the journals—paleographic, astrobiological, geospheric and a receipt for a six-volume set on Brachiopods. Complimentary calendars, notes of congratulation, letters of concern I threw anything that wasn’t money related back into a tub and wrote, “Head of John the Baptist” on the side of it with a

Sharpie. After all, in the Time of the Crickets nothing was more ineffectual than my education. I picked up a credit card application from the Geological Society of America. 1-800-BUY-COAL.

I called them up.

“Star Bank Plaza One Visa, how may I help you?”

“I’d like to take advantage of a recent credit card offer,” I said.

I told them I was a full tenured professor with no kids. They loved me. I could have bought a plane.

“Would you prefer igneous, metamorphic or sedimentary rocks structures on your card, ma’am?”

“Do you have the Deccan Traps? Cause I’d like the Deccan Traps if you have it. They’re in India. You know, a lot of people believe that eruption caused the extinction of fifty percent of life on earth.”

“No, Ma’am. We have the Grand Canyon, one with some jewels on it and a Hawaiian volcano.”

“Or if you have a comet smashing into the planet. I’d like that too.”

“Canyon, jewels, volcano.”

“Rim of Fire?”

While on the phone I drafted a speech to Credence and Annette:

Fellow Travelers and Attending Bellyfish,

While I have walked this road with you, led mostly by your courage and commitment, it is now time for me to depart and cut my way through the jungle alone. May we all meet under the bright arc of social revolution one day as The Public and celebrate our re-emergence as citizens and lovers.

Until then, I will set up web-based email and make sure you all have it before I leave.

Yours endlessly,

Friend of the Tiny Liver Hearts/Pool of Light

I took the bus downtown. I wanted to go to an actual travel agency because I thought that would make it feel more real. But the buildings looked like cut-outs and I felt like a paper doll. Annette gave me a white dress with

little bluebells on it that belonged to her grandmother. I was wearing that but I could have been wearing anything else. I could have been dressed like prom queen or for a day at the beach with a bucket and shovel. The background was fixed but I could have been stuck anywhere, made to lie flat on the lakes, hover above intersections, or placed askance on the painted ground.

I got off the bus at a plaza. It was paved with manufactured rock carved to look like flagstones. I thought they were real until someone told me and then I could see that the gutters between stones were too even to be actual masonry and that they weren't real and never had been.

The travel agency was on the other side of the plaza. I walked across the fake red rock and the sound of air brakes and wheelchair ramps faded. The air was dense. A boy threw a handful of pennies at some pigeons and they scattered to the skies. He laughed and ran after the rolling coins. When he found all the pennies he put them back into a Styrofoam cup, waited for the pigeons to land and threw them again. Beating wings fluttered by my head.

I had come there as a kid, when it was still called Redbird Square. My earliest memory is of being there with my mom. It was full of people and someone was speaking into a microphone. Every few minutes the crowd broke into cheering. Their voices rose and turned to a wild chant. I could feel it in the ground shudder with the rhythm of the words. It scared me and I leaned into a fold of my mama's red wool coat and squeezed her hand tighter. I put my cheek on it. It was as if the world came into me through her fingertips alone. No one's called it Redbird Square for years. They renamed it after the bank that paid for all the fake rock.

The travel agency stood before me. The window was full of fake snow, palm trees and sombreros. On a large white board, fares were listed:

Athens	\$ 759
Belize	\$ 386
Istanbul	\$ 399
Mexico City	\$ 284
Paris	\$ 438
Panama City	\$ 512
Phnom Penh	\$

I saw my body reflected as a faint outline on the glass. Some of the cities were outside of me and others were inside. Two were divided and started in me but streamed out in lines of letters and numbers. Belize was over my eyes. Mexico City began in my heart and over my abdomen was Phnom Penh, but most people probably wouldn't have seen that one. "Get away. You deserve it!" floated backwards over my head in the white sky.

Inside the agency, a woman with frosted hair and terra cotta skin sat at a desk next to a large rubber plant. She was on the phone and typing but waved me over to the seat opposite her. She wore coral lipstick and a diamond solitaire on a thin chain that rolled back and forth across her breastbone when she talked.

I looked through a brochure while I waited. There was one with a collage of jungle and rice paddies behind an old man's brown face. He was smiling like nothing had ever been wrong. I wondered if he liked macaroni and cheese.

"So," the travel agent said, "What can I help you with?"

Her eyelids were slightly wrinkled and weighed down by pink shimmer.

"Travel," I said.

"Well, that's what we're here for. Where would you like to go? We have a great special on Southeast Asia right now. Four nights in three capitals and two bonus days on the beach. There are six to choose from. I went last year and had a blast. Do you like spicy food?"

I saw tiny liver hearts hanging like peppers, bound and bunched in doorways and storefronts.

"Yes, I like spicy food."

"Good, cause boy they have it! I can take it in Mexican but it was a little much for me there. My boyfriend loved it, though. Couldn't get enough."

The diamond bounced against her chest.

"I like beautiful places," I said.

"Well, it about perfect for you then. I recommend Thailand or Vietnam."

She took the brochure from my hands, opened it to a page and pushed it across the desk.

IN AN ANCIENT LAND...

(Women in cowry shell hats enjoying re-colonization on green)

BEAUTY IS ETERNAL...

The travel agent held her breath. The diamond lay still.

There were small snapping sounds and I saw a vision. I saw origami Buddhas and Popsicle stick palaces burning like hay and ashes blowing over manufactured stone flags, carved to look real. I saw a Bamboo parliament of patio furniture lulled by the sound of quiet blackberries.

“Green,” I said and she started breathing again.

She pulled out a list of destinations.

“I have to say, Bangkok is still my favorite. Vietnam is very nice too. They have those cute little bicycle taxis.”

“Rickshaws?”

“Rickshaws—that’s it! I love those things.”

“What about Laos? Or Cambodia?” I asked.

“I don’t know if they have rickshaws.”

“They aren’t on the list of fares. Do you plan trips there?”

“Well, yes, we do but they’re still coming up.”

“Aren’t they beautiful?”

“Oh lovely, but with... more of a history if you know what I mean. You can’t get to some of the prettiest places.”

“Why?”

The travel agent played with a ring on her finger and glanced over at a wall clock.

“Landmines,” she said.

“Landmines?”

“I mean it’s not impossible, just inconvenient. You can get a guide. The children know those areas like their own backyard. They work cheap too. It just makes getting around that much harder. And when you’re on vacation...”

She trailed off.

“...You don’t need those kind of hassles.”

“What about Central America?” I asked and she bloomed.

“Oh! Now that is the place. I recommend Costa Rica. It’s progressive, eco-tourist friendly and has some of the best beaches in the world. Do you like yoga?”

I looked at the brochures under the leaning rubber plant but Central America, the Atlantis of my people, sunk under the golden waves. I just couldn’t do it, not yet. The travel agent saw me to the door and locked it behind me.

“Good luck,” she said through the glass, the diamond rolling across her chest.

Della Mylinak *Get away. You deserve it...000000799.99.*