

ZAZEN

9—The Rat Queen

Mirror thumped her bag down on the restaurant counter.

“Dude, they’ve totally sold this place!”

“Really?” I said.

Actually, I wasn’t surprised.

Mitch the cook was, though. She came out from the kitchen. Her face was red from working the grill and she was wearing a t-shirt of a pregnant woman carrying an assault rifle.

“No way,” she said, “You’re not serious. Franklin would never sell without giving us a chance to buy it first.”

“I am so fucking serious it’s not even funny,” said Mirror. “It’s a done deal. Everyone in the neighborhood already knows about it. That’s what that stupid work meeting’s all about.”

“It’s a rumor,” Mitch said. “There’s no way he would do that.”

Mr. Tofu Scramble came through the door and slid into his usual seat.

“Hey there,” he said. “Sure are a lot of you here today.”

“I’m not working yet so don’t ask me for anything,” said Mirror.

“Franklin’s selling the restaurant,” I said.

“Well, you know I heard about that, Della, and I thought it really is a shame. Oh well, I guess things have to change. One less thing to miss about this country. Oh, hey Mitch, Franklin said he got Spelt. Can I get some with my scramble?”

“We’re out,” I said.

“Out?” said Mr. Tofu Scramble, like his house had burned down.

I wrote down ‘rye’ and handed the ticket to Mitch. She put it in her pocket. A pancake started to smoke on the grill.

“I just don’t think he would do that,” she said.

“Dude, the new owners have been in here twice. Kelly waited on them.”

The skin on Mitch’s cheeks ticked.

“Kelly waited on them?”

“They’re from California,” Mirror said. “Not even vegetarian. I hope I get to wait on them. We’ll see much they want to buy this place.”

Mitch opened a bottle of wine and left it on the counter.

“Well, then everything is fucking free from now on,” she said and stomped back into the kitchen and seconds later a 2lb whisk hit the corkboard with the minimum wage standards.

Word of the sale spread. It took over the New Land Trust bombing as the favored topic. Everyone had an opinion:

Ed, Logic’s Only Son: You’re all going to get fired.

Mr. Tofu Scramble: Change often leads to transformation. Who would have thought I’d end up on one of the most beautiful beaches in the world.

Ed, Logic’s Only Son: None of you are getting welfare either.

Mr. Tofu Scramble: You know the Balinese women are so graceful because they balance things on their head.

It turned out Coworker Franklin had already put most of the kitchen equipment and all the decorative art pieces up on eBay. Half the neighborhood had been bidding on the Indonesian garden lattices for a week. Every time the outrage died out and Mitch calmed down, someone new walked through the door.

“Did Franklin really sell the restaurant?”

A loud crash in the kitchen as a heavy colander hit a row of hanging pots.

“Hey, can I see the Javanese batik screens? They look small on the computer.”

Glasses smashing against the metal rim of a trashcan.

“You know, I always thought this place would make a nice Tapas bar.”

Mitch pours a bottle of wine into a pan and a huge fireball engulfed the stove.

As the shift progressed, the kitchen got more and more liberal with the portions until they were slicing a whole salmon or vegan chocolate cake into quarters and dropping them randomly on tables. Mirror started making everyone free Mimosas. By 4pm anybody standing near her was drunk.

“Della,” she said jumping off the bar stool, “It’s your turn to do the shed. I did it last time and I’m sick of burying rats.”

The shed has a padlock but no one ever locks it. That’s how the animals get into it. I opened the doors wide and stepped back to give all them a chance to run out. Nothing happened. I waited, then stepped inside.

Franklin orders rice from an Indonesian catalog and they come in these 40lb canvas bags with red script and third eyes all over them. I grabbed one for Mitch and a tray of paper cups fell down and cups went everywhere. When I tried to put the tray back, it didn’t fit. I reached to get the tray and saw a carefully folded red bandana hidden under the rice pallet. I put it in my apron pocket and kept going. Everything had been eaten into. Egg noodles, salt crackers and buckwheat pancake mix. I found a bag of marshmallows cut open lengthwise.

Carrying the trash to the dumpster I passed the rat graveyard. Most of the twig crosses had been stepped on and what was left leaned sharply and dipped towards ground. Someone had tied the Buzz Lightyear doll to a new cross, the cross of the pregnant rat. And under Buzz Lightyear’s dangling feet were blue marbles and around the mound, a circle of pennies. I stopped and sat down in the half-tilled soil.

The sun was low and across Buzz Lightyear’s helmet tawny light fell. Water soaked into my underwear. On the grave itself someone had pressed beads into the dirt. Hundreds of them sprinkled, set and flashing like Pyrite in a creek. It must be a Rat Queen, I thought, what else? A Rat Queen, the natural symbol of New Honduras. Basta! I saw flags. Basta! On a field of red and yellow she towered over the computer-generated superhero, her belly full with the earth and at her feet pennies, marbles and beads like a thousand broken necklaces thrown in her path. Basta! I took the red bandana out of my apron pocket and tied it around Buzz Lightyear’s plastic feet. Then I opened the front of his space helmet and left him there to die.

I brought the bag of rice back to the kitchen.

Seconds later a large blast shook the building.

“What the fuck was that?” shouted Mitch.

Another blast came and I heard breaking glass. Everyone got down. The street filled with black smoke and people were running out of shops. We ran out too. The guy who owned the vintage clothing store next to us was dialing frantically on his cell phone and there was a dog freaking out and barking at everyone.

The explosions came from the auto shop on the corner. It was on fire. We ran towards the end of the block where people were gathering. The blast had come from a truck in the center of the auto shop lot. By the time we got there it was nothing but a charred skeleton. A huge, bright tongue of flame had swallowed it. Reaching up into the sky it bellowed and snapped.

“That garage is going to go,” said a woman next to us.

She worked at the salon across the street and still had hair clips in her hand. The orange light from the blaze reflected faintly on her cheeks and sweat cut fine pathways in the foundation she was wearing.

“It’s going to hit the kiosk first,” said another man. “See how the wind’s blowing?”

And he was right. The paint on the side of the kiosk was bubbling and the blaze mirrored in the windows splashed like lava. A large gust of wind came up and blew it all back the other way and the sky opened before us. Stars pricked the approaching night, clear and cloudless over our heads. Then it all went black and the fire roared to new life devouring the kiosk. It exploded and pieces of the flaming roof rained down like comets. They landed on cars and sidewalks. A piece landed right in front of me, burning and vivid. I could hear the tar cracking. It was the last black-owned business on the street.

I stepped closer and Mirror knocked me back.

“Are you fucking crazy?” she said, slapping the front of my apron and dress.

More pieces fell hissing to the ground and people moved back even further as the great blaze shot sparks and embers into the sky. I saw the Rat Queen rise from behind the gutted kiosk, her fur glistening with beads and wearing a crown of broken marbles.

Before me Old Honduras burned and New Honduras rose. Where once an old auto shop stood, now was raised a Popsicle stick palace, barely visible

but there all the same. From one angle it was a Bistro, from another a high-end knit shop. When I stood back it was a multi-use facility with a tattoo parlor above and a naturopathic clinic below. The sirens came at last but they were far too late.

A policeman with a wide nose and an oily forehead grabbed my arm.

“No one is leaving this block.”

The woman who ran the salon started crying, saying she had to pick up her kids and they would be scared if she didn't come, that there was no one to get them and I don't know if the woman was tired or how badly the explosion had scared her but she went into hysterics, sat down on the curb and wailed.

“Nobody is leaving,” said the cop and walked away.

Black tears poured down her face as her mascara ran. Thistles of kohl, briery eyes she looked up and I saw the face of a Saint martyred at the boundary of old and new. A patroness of New Honduras who would someday perform miracles for women stuck at work that could not pick up their kids from daycare in time.

“I can't just stay here,” she sobbed. “They'll be terrified.”

But the Rat Queen shook her head in a shower of pennies and beads and scratched at the cinders of Old Honduras, looking for her children too.

Police set up a barricade at one end of the street and another several blocks down in the other direction. Mirror hauled the Saint with the Black Tears off the curb and back to the restaurant. I followed a few minutes later, walking through gusts of smoke. Chips of flaming auto shop whizzed by my head, most of them no bigger than a quarter. There was still some pink on the horizon but mostly it was night now. Above us stars were hidden in the haze.

An hour after the explosion Rise Up Singing was packed. The whole block was standing around eating vegan doughnuts waiting for a chance at the landline. Gangs, they said. But not everyone agreed. Insurance, some thought. One guy said developers but nobody believed him because that would just be too obvious. Mitch was giving away food and Mirror was taking advantage of the situation to drive turnout for the sex party.

“I’m gonna need a friggin’ warehouse,” she said, opening another bottle of champagne.

Jimmy called. I don’t know how she got through. She said it was getting live coverage and we could see the news trucks but the police told us they would give the interviews. Jimmy also said barricades were going up all over the north part of town. Time of the Crickets. I asked her to call Annette and let her know I was okay.

The cops weren’t telling us anything and after a few more hours people had all kinds of dumb theories—bio-warfare testing site, elaborate casting call (we’re all going to be in a movie!) or my favorite, foreign invasion. Like some kind of Maquiladora Kindertransport had gone rogue and taken a beachhead.

I hit a limit and took some dishes back to the kitchen. On the counter by the grill was a photograph of the woman I met at the party.

“That was under the dishwasher,” said Kelly, “I’m trying to dry it out.”

I picked it up. It was a black and white. She was standing on a fire escape, leaning toward the camera and was lost in whatever point she was making to the photographer. It must have been a sunny day because her hair was gray where the light hit. Her hands were caught mid-gesture and her silver fingers blurred. I knew the expression on her face from our short conversation, something exultant between rage and patience, a predatory kind of inspiration. Kelly said her name was Tamara.

“She used to date one of the cooks. Mirror knows her. Give it to her.”

I dried it off and put it in my pocket.

Around 2am the cops let us go. It happened all of a sudden. There was a radio communication that set all the police off and they packed their bullhorns and their sawhorses, took down the barricades and left. When we walked outside the auto shop was a cinder and everything had a film of greasy smoke on it.

Mirror’s friend Jolie showed up in a Ford Econoline and started packing out the dry goods and what was left of the food in the walk-in. Mitch gave me some white wine and an untouched vegan Pineapple-Lemon cake, both of which I put in my bike basket. Devadatta, who had come in early in the

afternoon, was passed out drunk on a booth seat. I told Kelly I'd walk her home but it took a few minutes to wake Devadatta up.

"I'm sweating," she said.

"Take off your sweater."

She did. Underneath was a pale blue tee shirt that said 'Reincarnation—
You Asked For It.'

"I didn't ask for it," I said.

She looked down. "Oh yeah. Me neither."

We left. I rolled my bike down the sidewalk with one hand on the handlebars and the other on Devadatta's shoulder to steady her. I had to sidestep debris still hot and smoking faintly. Every now and then a little piece would pop and crack open near us and we'd jump.

Passing under the emergency lamp near the post office Devadatta confided in me that her real name was Galaxy.

"But I wanted something less...less obvious," she said, "You know, Devadatta was a disciple of Buddha."

"I thought he was the one who slandered him and took over his monastery."

"Right," she said and threw up on the leg of a mailbox. "He wasn't a very good disciple."

She stood still with her eyes closed. The moon was thin and her skin was green. I saw vines and coins growing up around her. She smiled and started to walk again.

"So you just liked the sound of it?" I asked.

"No. I like Devadatta. Can you imagine fighting a Buddha?"

She dug in her bag and pulled out something wrapped in a napkin. It was a chocolate doughnut.

"I think it was a punk rock thing," she said, taking a big bite, "I used to shave my head. Total straight-edge."

A minute later she threw up in a storm drain and sat down. I sat on the curb beside her and opened one of the bottles of white wine. Devadatta rocked back and forth on her haunches with her head hanging down.

“Malassana,” she said. “Deep squat. Raina says it’s good for the root chakra. I think it’s helping.”

“Have you ever washed your hair with wine?”

“Beer. And eggs.”

“I’m going to try it,” I said.

I hung my head over the gutter and poured wine on my head. I twisted my hair around my hands and rung the excess out. I shook my head. Drops of Chateau Montaigne went everywhere.

“Oh my god. I’m gonna throw up,” she said.

It was the smell but I had to get the dust of Old Honduras off of me otherwise I would never make it through. I’d go extinct at the boundary like the rats and the blackberries and the blacks.

“I’m okay.”

“Yeah, me too,” I said wiping wine out of my eyes.

Above us the night changed. Clouds from the south came in low. Devadatta pulled her sweater out of the bike basket and put it back on.

“Don’t you think it’s weird that the cops just left like that? It couldn’t have been a gang thing,” she said.

Devadatta looked down the street toward the bridge about a mile off. Police cars were parked down there and that something was going on. Spinning blue and red lights reflected off the girders and dark water.

“Is mercury retrograde?” she asked.

A hole in the clouds appeared right behind her and I could see the stars bright as anything.

“Yes. I’m sure it is.”

Like a spirograph with no beginning or end.

“Thought so. Feels like it.”

Devadatta stood.

“I’ll be fine the rest of the way on my own. I’d give you a hug but you smell like wine and I might barf.”

It was 3am. The emergency lamps were behind us. Ahead was the next barricade. Devadatta started walking down the street. She was singing something about blackout angels but I couldn’t tell what it was because she

was facing the other way. I remember thinking, I feel like a bullet in a gun. Like whatever is inside me is going to come out. Like I have no control over it at all.

I stayed by the storm drain and thought about the auto shop and the New Land Trust Building and all those people trying to figure out who bombed them. Not why, but who. Who exactly. As if by knowing, they would earn the right to forget about it.

When I called the bomb threat into the sports bar at the Asian market I did it because I wanted them to feel like I did, to cry over nothing and see bodies in the video aisles. But it didn't work because they weren't already scared. If I had done it after the New Land Trust they would have been. Timing. And walking home it occurred to me that the great thing about a bomb threat is how much it leaves to the imagination. Like your mom saying you're in trouble but not telling you why—you go over everything it could be in your mind. There were hidden streams of guilt running underneath. There had to be. After what they'd been doing to me in the past year? I wanted to see what they looked like scared. With their stupid silent wars, their reality shows and fake rock, they deserved some reflection on the nature of impermanence.

I asked Raina once if she thought she could sit still on fire.

“I mean if you were trained to do it,” I said, “like those monks.”

“Well, I think if I were really convinced that I was done with this lifetime, I could. But I think we make our own reality and that's just not the kind of reality I would make.”

Yeah, well the kind of reality I'd make doesn't have people on fire in it either—Hey Raina! How do you say Chardonnay in Sanskrit? The little reality makers—I got up to go. My mind was still running over the theory of the bomb threat. Down by the bridge, the lights were gone. The police must have driven away. I cut across the dark intersection. The Rat Queen shivered, casting her beads.