

ZAZEN

12—Colony of the Elect

Daylight crossed the couch.

“Some group called Citizens For a Rabid Economy,” Tamara said, “Can you believe it? It’s fucking great.”

She poured two shots of vodka sat down and crossed her legs.

“You think there really was a bomb?” I asked.

“Maybe. Either way it was genius. Shows them for what they are.”

“What’s that?”

“A pathetic expression of a cultural behemoth that values neither life nor death.”

She giggled and reached for some crackers Mirror brought out hours earlier. Her lavender and blonde hair curled against her cheek. She put a cracker in her mouth.

“The real question is...” she said with her mouth full, “Are they to blame?”

“The shoppers?”

“All of them. The shoppers, the police, the television crews covering it—is it their fault?”

“Well, no. Not really. They’re part of a dynamic.”

She closed her blue eyes slowly. Her bottom lid came up more than the upper came down and I felt like she was still looking at me.

“Oh,” she said, “A dynamic.”

Mirror had already passed out on the couch. Tamara leaned her head against the arm and blinked at me, waiting.

“Yes. A dynamic.”

“So, they’re not to blame,” said Tamara.

She took off her rings and set them on the coffee table.

“Well, the whole thing is wrong,” I said.

“So the system is wrong but the people perpetuating it are not to blame and neither are the people profiting from it or enforcing it.”

She grinned. One of her incisors was partially broken off.

“That line of thinking makes me sleepy,” she said.

Tamara grabbed a pillow from the bed and lay down on the floor. I thought she was playing around but she wasn't. She was asleep almost immediately. When I left she was breathing long, even breaths undisturbed by the pool of sunlight that had come to surround her.

It was Tamara who told me that two boys from the neighborhood got killed the night of the bombing. I'm sure that's what Credence was calling about too. He was probably trying to warn me that there was tension in the neighborhood and nobody knew which way it was going to go.

I stepped outside still drunk and unbraided my hair. Brown and crimped it fell around me. I shook my head. A car started. I turned. Steam rose from the windshield as it warmed. It was Sunday. The street with its shuttered bistros and gated shops was half in shadow and where light struck the road, gray vapor shimmered. I walked out and set my feet upon the centerline and headed home.

Colony of the Elect Boulevard is a riverbed. There are two banks, one is green and the other is brown. The way the current goes the trash all washes to one side. Broken wheels with bent rims gleaming, white cardboard boxes stained with grease and filled with crumbs, 32oz Princess of the World drink containers, all strewn upon a single shore. And ghost mothers roll armies of IVF twins down the street. Carefully, they wheel their strollers around the mud and straw bricks of a pyramid that lie scattered and dissolving in the lapping water.

I walked by the storm drain where Devadatta had thrown up the day before and remembered seeing lights down by the bridge. I thought about the dead boys and I thought about the box-mall-church. I put the image of the woman crying in the parking lot, the one with the daughter who lost the doll at Superland™. I put her face next to that of the two dead boys. They looked the same to me. The more I tried to see them as separate, the more they blended into a single face. The image came to me like a sending: a light skinned black man with large red freckles and a bad perm crying for his lost

doll while he bled to death from a gunshot wound. Behind him was the faint outline of a woman in a bronze mini skirt, a machete glinted in her hand, and over them all the Rat Queen stood, sniffing the air.

I saw a group of pregnant women by the yoga studio. They rubbed their goldfish bowl and snow globe bellies. I could have gone around them but I walked until I was deep in the abyss of that winter aquarium. I thought of Annette. And Jimmy. I thought about the Black Ocean and the baby rats. Credence, Grace and Miro. Everything, all of it, was on fire. There was nothing I could do that would change a thing. Everything would still burn. My cheeks would still blister and my hands blacken. The only thing that made any sense was the bomb threat because that's where instinct met action, clarity.

I turned onto our street and leaves blew across my path and skittered sideways like crabs, rattling up the sidewalk and settling on the grass. They were all over our porch. I put some in my pocket walking up the steps.

Annette was hanging a black lace shawl over a mirror in the entryway. The rayon fringe angled down leaving a corner of the glass, splattered with yellow paint, exposed. She hung then re-hung the shawl but there was always one part of the mirror uncovered.

"It's a Jewish thing anyway," she said and let the shawl drape like a sash across the frame.

She sat down in a chair by the door that no one uses. It was full of coats. In her hand was a cordless phone. I stayed back because I smelled like vodka and was suddenly embarrassed that I was out drinking while she and everyone else she knew was trying to find out the names of the boys, hoping it wasn't someone in their family. I tried to tack the shawl up again and finally got it to stay. Annette watched me the whole time but I wasn't on her mind. I was just another thing in the distance.

After a few minutes Annette took a long breath, put the phone down and asked where I'd been. I lied. I said I was at Jimmy's. She smiled a little.

"Cool. I get to tell your mama you're gay."

"Go ahead."

"You've been hanging out a lot."

"Yeah."

I couldn't think of anything deeper to say. I sat on the stairs across from Annette and we talked about how stupid the term bisexual was. Like you were different species because you slept with another human and how it was really somebody else's line and not hers or mine at all. We both agreed the joy of my gayness would kill my parents. First, black grandchildren and now the fantasy of two women on the couch at family gatherings (entwined and laughing as if it were all going to be okay). Yes, they will finally be dead from politically informed glee. And most importantly, the Bobsey Twins of Labor Unrest, though unable to rescue the PUBLIC from the slander of BIG GOVERNMENT, would be placed in an historical context where the primacy of class had naturally yielded to its more ornamental, if secondary features: race and gender.

Annette said the only thing better would be if one of us went to prison.

She stretched then put the phone back on the charger, "You know," she said, "The next time you date a boy Grace is going to accuse you of exercising heterosexual privilege."

"The whole thing with Jimmy may be over by the time I see them anyway."

"What about the Anniversary?"

"Anniversary?"

The green fans of the Katydids fluttered. I knew what she meant. I just didn't feel like talking about it. Annette said Credence practically had to quit to get the day off work so he could go.

"I'm not going," I said, but I say that every year, "It's not like I signed a contract. It's not going to rain comets and ice if Grace has to be sad all on her own."

Annette shook out her blue satin robe and looked at the shawl on the mirror. Her eyes were dilated from sitting in the dark. Behind her, sun came through the window and illuminated the white gauze curtains until they glowed.

"I knew those two boys when they were babies," she said, "I went to high school with one of their brothers."

She wandered into the kitchen. On my way up the stairs I thought about something Tamara said. She said the black community here is our Lord Brahma and that every time we try to escape their gaze another head grows and looks down at what we've done. The conversation descended into debates about exoticizing minorities and ended up somewhere on the banks with the mud bricks. But because it was in my mind, walking up the stairs I felt like Annette and the Bellyfish were watching me. Like they knew what I had done out at the box-mall-church and were waiting to see what I'd do next. There was curious neutrality to their attention. Bright and ready like a Snapdragon.

The rat family's cell phones were still in their packaging. I carefully wrapped them in some shirts and buried them in the closet next to the Head of John the Baptist. Then I slept for 2 hours. I dreamt of tidal waves. When I woke the world was washed clean and the streets empty of water. But then I realized it wasn't over. It was only the drag of a great wave calling all of itself to itself, and gathering. I looked at the dry road and knew that I was between moments.