

ZAZEN

Ch 22—Deer Teeth

I woke up in a wooden bed under layers of quilts with the idea in my head that something was about to change. I sat up and looked out the window. Everything was covered by a thin layer of snow except for where the goats had beaten muddy paths into the ground. There were several outbuildings, rounded cob structures with embedded color tiles in geometric patterns. One looked like a woodshed and to the left of that was a brick structure with dark gray smoke curling up into the sky. I put on my clothes and went downstairs. The kitchen was empty. A bag of coffee sat on a large oak table and someone had been baking bread. There was a note from Tamara saying that she was out back and to come find her.

I set the note back down and got some water. I had been with Grace and Miro in a hundred kitchens like that. Everything was wood, metal, paper or glass; nothing was disposable. I knew where to look for cloth filters, tea, compost buckets and co-op containers of peanut butter, honey and Tahini. I knew how the bread would taste, how the clay mugs would feel and how cold the kitchen would be until people came and it got warm from the bodies. I knew someone would have to boil the water for the dishes and someone would have to bury the trash at night so the bears didn't get it. And if you couldn't feel the despair that was in everything, if you were numb to the intense loss at the center of it all, it was like stepping right into a children's story. Fresh milk and cozy fires on the cusp of a wild wood.

I walked out back to where I had seen the cob buildings. A goat bleated at me. Tamara was over by the smokehouse. She waved me towards her.

“Want some smoked fish?”

“I thought you were vegan.”

“No, Mirror only speaks to me because she considers my conversion a life goal.”

She handed me a pink strip of salmon jerky.

“She says you're a big old faggot and you're off the party list forever,” I said.

Tamara smiled and blew into her hands.

“Good. I like Mirror. She’s stubborn.”

Tamara cut off a couple of bigger pieces of fish. A roll of wax paper was strung up on the door and she wrapped the salmon.

“Where is everybody?”

“They drove into Breaker’s Rise to pick up Astrid, Britta’s girlfriend. You’ll meet her later,” she closed the smokehouse door, “Astrid’s kind of like Mirror, a little overzealous about details. She’s okay. I think I like Mirror better.”

There was a sharp faint glare in the east but it didn’t look like the sun was going to break. We came around the other side of the smokehouse. A cord of wood was covered with a blue tarp and tied with bright yellow twine. Tamara got down and cinched it tighter.

“Want to see something?” she said.

She took me around by the woodshed. Under a tin overhang next to some baskets of kindling was the beginning of an elaborate Nativity scene on a platform of baled hay. It had a cob manger with little tin foil solar panels and a computer chip star.

“We do something like this every year but this time it started early.”

She looked up at the sky and blinked.

“I think it’s the war. People feel it coming.”

She flipped a switch and tiny white and red lights lit the crèche.

“Astrid wants to put the three kings up against the manger wall with a firing squad of PETA Barbies in orange faux fur bikinis. Can’t you see Mirror doing something like that?”

“Why do you say it’s the war?”

“Because that’s what’s driving everything right now.”

“Yeah, but when I talk about the war people act like I’m delusional and just trying to ruin their ‘70s T-shirt glitter decal fantasy march.”

She laughed and shook her head.

“That’s because you talk about the war like it’s already happening. It’s not happening for most people. Some of us, yes, but not for everyone.”

“Because they’re fucking desensitized automatons that reproduce through violence?”

“Doesn’t matter. People are on their own learning curve and outrage is a personal thing. We’re short on it already.”

She pulled a box off a shelf.

“And,” she said, “When people do figure it out, they need something on the other end that they can be a part of.”

“Like a tableau of horrific understanding?”

She stopped.

“You know Della, you’re funny. But you’re like a switch that’s stuck open.”

A thousand answers went through my head but mostly I just wanted to leave. Turn around and walk off. But what was I going to do? Hide behind the nearest goat? I stood there on the verge of tears feeling like I wanted to punch a wall.

Tamara plunked the box on the thatch next to the manger.

“Britta’s mom sent these.”

She opened the box. It was full of Barbie and Sailor Moon dolls.

“We’re using them for the nativity scene. I originally envisioned the Virgin as some sort of homemade Valerie Solanis action figure but I got out-voted,” she picked up an anime vampire in a biohazard suit, “I’m trying to adjust.”

She waggled the doll at me.

“No gods! No masters!” she said in a toy voice, “Hi! I’m Della,” she squeaked, “I like dinosaurs!”

“I hate dinosaurs,” I mumbled.

The doll danced in front of me. I tried to ignore it.

“I like Pterosaurs!”

She was too stupid to look at.

“I’m an invertebrate paleontologist.”

“No. You’re a pussy who can’t take criticism.”

“Fuck this!” I said and shoved the box.

“Oh relax,” she said “We’re all a little like that.”

I felt that part of me that couldn't be moved, moving, a glacial shift in all my horrible pride. A crack in what kept me alone.

Tamara put the doll back and turned off the manger light. I stepped out from under the tin roof. Two dog-sized goats wandered toward a covered stall. Tamara blew on her hands again. Her lavender hair was vibrant against the whitening sky.

"Come on," she said "I'll show you around.

The temperature was dropping and the sounds were changing as the layer of snow crunching underfoot began to freeze. Barn swallows rushed the sky and their chattering calls echoed on the dormant landscape. Not all the people who lived on the Farm were there. Some were travelling and some were in the city. We passed empty bedrooms and I saw yurts and straw bale shelters tucked in the woods. I learned their names as I went. Coryn, Marco, Daria, Asher, Miranda, and Francis who everyone called Black Francis.

We took a trail the pine trees where a creek cut, jagged and half-frozen through the new snow. Tamara pointed to a small hutch covered in tarp with lines running to it.

"Most of our power is solar and we pull the rest out of the creek. The batteries get charged there and we run it into the house."

She led me back up through the woods past where the yurts and tree houses were. We talked about being teenagers. She grew up near Los Angeles in some suburban corridor between a mall and a freeway. She got pregnant halfway through high school by some skater kid who bussed tables at the Olive Garden and had an abortion.

"I'm sure we did it just to have something to do," she said "Nothing ever changed there, nothing ever happened. I swear time doesn't even fucking exist in those places."

We ran over the names of some of the bands that were around then and I knew some of them, they were mostly political hardcore.

"I was super vegetarian then and used to go to the Krishna house feeds all the time but I never believed in reincarnation."

She opened the wax paper took a piece of salmon, wrapped it in its metallic skin and ate it.

“I loved LA though,” she said.

I hate LA. I’m all for the earthquake.

“It’s nothing but cement and razor wire,” I said.

“Right and I felt like if I could be alive there, nothing could kill me. It was exhausting, though. I lived in a house with fifteen other people. All the bands stayed with us when they came through on tour. A lot of Italian political hardcore bands, some Dutch. There were a lot of fights with the police then. They would come down to whatever demonstration we did in riot gear and we’d throw bottles at them. A few people would get arrested, a few would get stitches and everyone walked around the next day acting like heroes. It got pretty ridiculous sometimes.

We had to fight the skinheads at the benefit shows and it would go on the news as a riot like we were all the same people. It seemed for a while, though, like something was coming to a head. Riot cops were shutting all the stores and marching through the streets in the thousands I really thought that we were close to some big shift and that it was all about to happen but it didn’t. That winter one of my best friends killed herself and like half the house started shooting dope. By spring there was nothing left of it and the bands coming through were more like jocks than anything else. It was like the whole thing dissipated worldwide at once. That’s how I met Mirror. She was part of a younger set that was all into queer politics and being vegan.”

Tamara put away the remaining salmon and smiled.

“You know, she would kill me for telling you this,” she said “But when I met Mirror she was a brown-haired runaway hippy chick who listened to Ani DiFranco.”

“I am so glad you told me that.”

“You should definitely tell her.”

Tamara pulled off a glove and shook it. There were small chunks of snow in the weave and she picked them out.

“I still can’t imagine you with the Olive Garden skater boy but I can see you in Los Angeles.

“Yeah when I came here it was shock, all the cold and gray. I went out to the coast and the water was freezing. The beaches were rocky, black and

sharp and it seemed like everyplace I'd felt strong and free and alive was gone forever. I felt like someone else completely."

I also knew what it was like to be somewhere foreign, waiting for the person you used to be to show up. It was something that connected us.

We came out of the woods and followed the creek back down to where we started. She took me through the out buildings near the smokehouse. Inside one were several 55-gallon drums with lines running out the bottom into 5-gallon containers. It looked like a still. There were small electric heaters on the ground. Clean white T-shirts hung on nails.

"This is where we store and filter the fryer oil to make the low-grade Biodiesel. We pick it up from the restaurants and run it in the secondary tanks."

I followed her to the garage where another old Mercedes was being converted to run on fryer oil. The work areas were immaculate. Every tool had a place and every drawer was labeled.

We talked about the war and people we knew in common. Who was leaving and who wasn't. She said if she had to go anywhere it would be Columbia or Chiapas. We decided that the general consensus in our demographic was Nepal or Costa Rica. I told her about Mr. Tofu Scramble and how he wanted Sri Lanka for the curry but couldn't take the monsoons.

"No problem with the civil war because it's 'small and mature.' Can you believe that? Small and mature. Like a Bonsai."

"Yeah. I don't really mind people like that leaving. They're all born landlords anyway. I mean have you ever had your rent raised more often than when a hippy owns the building? 'I'm sorry but I got to, man.' They should have it on their fucking tombstones."

We walked out onto the dirty snow in front of the garage.

"People like you though, that would be different," she said.

"I wish I could be okay with going."

"No you don't. It's a pretty chicken shit thing to do."

I felt ashamed for even thinking about it.

"But you can't just be out there alone or you'll go crazy. For instance," she paused, "One person could never have set off those bombs in town, not

without casualties. It took lot of people working smart together to pull that off.”

The air electrified. It was the closest she'd come to admitting involvement. I wasn't sure what to say because I realized then that I didn't want to know.

Tamara looked out over the gray and white land.

“It's just something you'll need to think about sometime,” she said and started walking again, “for your own sanity.”

We spent another hour going around the property and looking at all the stuff they built or were working on. They made their own beer, jam and goat cheese.

There was a slaughterhouse several hundred yards away where the creek turned south, a one-room brick building flush with the horizon line. Tamara said they butchered and skinned whatever they shot hunting right on the property. Deer mostly, and used everything but the teeth, which they kept in Mason jars over the fireplace.

“Britta says she's going to do some big art project with them but I don't think she's going to get around to it for a while. Here.”

Tamara held out a jar of grooved yellow teeth.

“No thanks.”

She didn't move. I thought she was joking.

“No really, no thanks.”

She didn't move. I couldn't figure out what she was doing or what she wanted from me. She just kept standing there with the deer teeth. Maybe I was tired, or just confused but I started to think that it might all be a test. Like she was the freaky homeless woman on the road with the magic charm that I don't know I'll need later but only get it if I do what she says now— TAKE THE DEER TEETH, DELLA! —and if I don't it all vanishes, the goats, the crèche, the idea that something different is possible, all of it— TAKE THE DEER TEETH, DELLA! —and I'll wake up in a convenience store parking lot. Blazing patio furniture on the traffic island and wearing nothing but my finest identity, a nosegay of slivered contrast unified by the

ineffable mist of personhood. It was too much. In that moment I wanted to be on the farm and nowhere else.

Tamara shook the jar at me.

I snatched the teeth out of her hands and opened it.

They smelled like acrid leather. I think it was the iron in the blood.

Britta walked in. I felt instantly guilty. Like she was going to ask what I was doing with her deer teeth. But she didn't fucking care. No one does. I live in my own goddamned world. I screwed the lid back on the jar and ran upstairs embarrassed.

I grabbed my rock hammer and notebook and went out over the snowy field, walking towards the Bitterbrush. I stopped at every ridge that might be exposed rock. Anything I found that looked like it wasn't mud I smashed with my hammer.