

ZAZEN

Chapter 23 – Disco

“All I know is I don’t want to be part of it. Not their power, not their plastic, not their food—fucking gross slavery meat.”

Astrid dropped her dishes into the soapy water. Her thin blonde hair was in pink plastic barrettes and she wiped her forehead on her upper arm.

Tamara laughed.

“Oh fuck primitivism!” she said, “Fuck Zerzan, Jensen and all those guys. I don’t see them taking down elk with a spear or foraging the roadside between speaking engagements.”

Britta turned into a blowfish and floated towards Astrid spiny and offended.

Astrid sponged the back of a silver bowl.

“I don’t want to be on their grid, that’s all,” she said.

“Well, that’s fine but a lot of people do and we’re going to have to deal with them and stop pretending Hippy Easter is coming and everyone’s going to just wander into the wild and live polyamorously.”

Astrid darkened and her large freckles stood out.

“Yeah, well you know, when the shit comes down and their whole world’s nothing but blowing ash, then they’ll fucking ‘wander into the wild,’ as you put it.”

Tamara slipped a stack of plates into the water.

“No. They’ll wander over to the next town and they’ll take whatever they can take through force until someone takes it from them.”

The blowfish floated away from the sink.

It was like watching a leftist soap opera. I liked the girl with the purple hair but she was kind of a bitch. I thought the blonde one might be up to no good and I didn’t care about the other because she was part of a boring subplot. But it was no different than hanging out in the kitchen at Rise Up Singing and I no longer knew why I was there. I was beginning to think what Tamara meant by saying there were “people like me” in Breaker’s Rise was no deeper than Barbie doll humor. We hadn’t talked about the bombings at all

and every time there was an opening in the conversation for it to come up naturally, she changed the subject. I felt lost at the Farm. They weren't interested in what I was interested in. I tried to open up new lanes of discussion, anything other than baking without yeast or how funny the strip mall chains would look with grass growing on them and beetles everywhere, but I failed. I could no longer see why they wanted me there at all.

On the fourth night, that changed. Jules and Desiree were playing Go in the living room. Astrid and Britta had gone into town to do laundry. I was in the kitchen explaining the possible causes of the Permo-Triassic extinction to Tamara.

“Changes in glaciation: feasible but boring. Comets and supernovas, which I like better, but then I lean toward catastrophism, and my personal favorite—

Britta walked in, excited “Someone tried to take out a transmission line going into the city.”

“—killer methane bubbles the size of North America.”

“It was stupid,” Astrid came in behind Britta, “They tried to drive a car into it.”

I thought about saying it again but no one was listening.

“At least he tried,” said Britta, “I remember when I was in high school a line went down in the river and the surge blew out like half the televisions in the city. It was fucking awesome!”

Jules leaned on the doorframe.

“Oh, come on,” Astrid laughed, “It was stupid. He tried to drive his car into the base of the tower and some dumb guard threw himself in front and he swerved. If you're going to do something that pointless with your life you should at least be willing to take out the stupid guy who jumps in front of you. Instead, he didn't hit the tower and still killed the guard.”

“That's a shame,” said Tamara.

I wasn't sure if she meant the guard or the transmission line. I was still looking for a polite way back to the Permian Extinction.

“Can you believe somebody would do that for minimum wage?” said Britta, “Hmmm... serve nachos at a fucking Mexi-kiosk? Or stand by a phallic

symbol of resource enslavement waiting for someone to drive into it so you can leap in front of the car?”

“Does anybody know the name of the guy in the car?” asked Tamara. Nobody did. Astrid knelt by the wood stove.

“Do you know how much power runs through the main lines going south?” she said, “About 4200 watts at full capacity. That’s like, three nuclear power plants.”

“Suicide by transmission line,” said Jules.

Astrid put more wood in the stove belly, her cheeks fuchsia in the heat of the open firebox. She closed the latch. I wasn’t paying that much attention to the conversation. It was the kind of talk you could get anywhere over spelt cookies and a microbrew but Astrid was stuck on the idea.

“Yeah, but if you did take out some of those big lines out it would be a total mess.”

“Well sure,” said Jules, “But they’re all gated now. You’d need a car or truck filled with explosives to get through.”

“No you wouldn’t,” I said.

I was thinking about Holocene deposits and how I had never really given the Cenozoic much a fair chance. Mostly because I’m anti-mammal.

Jules was annoyed.

“Yes, you would,” he said, “Even if you jump out, a truck or a car is not going to get through the gate with enough momentum to knock the tower over. You’d need explosives.”

The blaring subtext broke my train of thought...Hi, I’m Jules. I’m the Know-How Guy of the Group. Sitar music fades ...It was just bunch of residual pre-feminist hat-doffing and it was irritating because I wanted to explain methane clathrates to Tamara.

“You don’t want to take out multiple lines running south anyway,” I said, “You’d want to take out one big line going south so the others lines stay open and carry the overload. That way you might even blow a substation if an HV fuse opened too slowly.”

Tamara set a full kettle on the woodstove.

“So how would you do it?” she asked.

“I’m curious too,” Jules said.

I hadn’t thought about it but I hate being patronized. I’d defended my dissertation against some of the best scientists in the world. Real jerks, some of them, and I didn’t feel like getting talked down to by some tinkering Robinson Crusoe of Anarchy Island.

“Well...” I said loudly, “I might start by looking at the soil those things are built on and when they were built. There’s a lot of silt, sand and gravel along the river and compacting is expensive. They used to be far more careful about it than they are now. I’m sure they did as little as possible. I’d look at where the towers sit on non-cohesive soils.”

Kimba swipes at the usurper.

“That just shows where it’s less stable, not how you’d get to the base of the tower to set explosives,” Jules said.

From the jungle, Kimba’s spirit father yells out a warning—

“Fuck getting to the tower. Those gates are meant to slow down someone stupid enough to drive a truck through them. I wouldn’t bother with it at all.”

—but his words of warning turn into fireflies and Kimba charges on.

“I’d find a spot on bad soil where the line crosses the river and set a bunch of charges to try to dunk it in the water.”

“It wouldn’t work,” said Jules.

Methane bubbles popping as I followed my pride down a hole.

“It’s called soil improvement,” I said, “They tried to use it to build the Russian Railroad in the 1930s. A guy at Davis was an expert in it. You set charges on unstable ground to cause liquefaction. Works like an earthquake and turns the ground to quicksand for a few seconds. This whole area is prone to mudslides and everyone builds on it like they’re setting up a pup tent. Theoretically you could do a lot of stuff that way.”

“Could you really?” Tamara asked.

“I have no fucking idea but it beats driving a Volvo into a transmission line.”

The room was silent. Tamara’s eyes were sharp small moons. She held a tea bag by the string between her fingers and it spun midair like a cat toy.

“Well,” she dropped the bag into a cup and grabbed the kettle, “Coryn and Asher get back tonight. We can ask them if they know more about the guy who drove into the tower.”

“Who?”

“Coryn and Asher.”

I had forgotten about the others. The empty rooms of the farmhouse were integrated into my sense of the natural order. The idea that people were coming to fill them disturbed me. I knew nothing about them, just irrelevant details, that Marco and Daria shared a room but weren't together, that Asher was trans, that Coryn spent a year in Thailand with a begging bowl and Black Francis had a crush on Tamara, which she resented.

“I think you'd like Daria,” Tamara said, “She was a biology major.”

I hate biology majors. It's the chick squad for scientists. Nothing more was said about transmission lines or the Permo-Triassic Extinction.

After that conversation though, I began to sense the work going on beneath the seed-based cheeses and 'zines. An undercurrent of excitement bearing no relationship to anything on the surface and which ran through the most trivial interactions. I recognized the feeling from my childhood, the excitement that was there when people came to our house. Or when we went to theirs and slept over or drove back late. Credence, Cady and I would spend the whole day running around with all the other kids, chasing chickens or playing in the forest in our underwear, then get carried to bed half-asleep while the adults talked. There was nothing they said that I could pin the feeling to, but I knew it like a smell or a quality of air. It was so familiar that when I caught it again as an adult, it hurt. It was a ghost from a lost world and I was the only survivor, that's how it felt.

When we were older the whole thing was less mysterious. It was just training. Grace and Miro taught each of us to use multiple shell addresses so we could communicate when the clampdown came. A series of post office boxes, “safe” houses, letters inside letters sent through shifting middlemen and burned upon receipt. It was practice. Don't talk in restaurants. Take your trash with you or shred it. Never say anything over a telephone line you

wouldn't want read back to you in court. I spent my childhood waiting for a signal to go underground.

By the end of my first week at the Farm everyone who lived there was back. Tamara was right. I did like Daria. She was a substrate receptor geek who played drums and competed in Miss Leather contests. Coryn was all right too, kind of a femmy red head with cobras on her back. She'd wandered out of her high school Dianic Coven into West Oakland and spent her twenties there. She said she didn't mind the drive-bys but couldn't take all the new white people. I told her they were here too.

I barely saw Marco and Asher because they spent all their time with Jules in the garage. Black Francis, however, was unavoidable. He followed Tamara everywhere. And when she told him to go away, he followed me.

Other people began to arrive as well. Three the first night. Seven the following morning. More after that. There was an action coming up in the city to mark the anniversary of the formation of the New Land Trust and several collectives were involved. It seemed like every few hours somebody was showing up. Britta and Desiree got put in charge of sleeping arrangements and Astrid organized the grocery store runs and monitored power usage so that the lights stayed on.

The action was to be a coordinated lock-down. The idea was to block traffic all over the city while another group did a guerilla theater piece in front of the New Land Trust Building. Tamara referred to it as Puppets of Rage.

"I'm sure the kids will be crying."

She wasn't much moved by the spectacle.

"Wake me when we move on to real people," she said.

Heads of giant puppets sat like boulders along the driveway.

Coryn was in charge of setting up the work groups and Tamara signed me up to make Paper Mache.

"From each according to his ability..." she said and walked off.

I found an outcrop of rock near the farm and crawled around on it. When anyone asked, I helped out. I got to make the puppet of Consumer Debt. Mostly though, I spent my time eating lentils, smashing open

concretions with rock a hammer and listening to Radiohead. It was almost a vacation.

At night everybody hung out in the kitchen or in the hallways or stairs, having circular debates until near dawn. Ends versus means? Nature versus torture? Where to buy a thousand feet of rope? Someone suggested the six-month anniversary sale at the Wal-Mart near Superland™. A fight almost broke out. Deal-breaker? Or using the enemy's greed against them? I was going to argue the position of changing the system from within but the conversation turned when someone said they'd gone to school with someone else's sister and everyone started tracing their histories back to the most fleeting intersections. You knew K—? My exstepfather's son recorded a keyboard track on an accordion side project he did for this compilation. Small world (Destroyed by flames of gross misunderstanding) Wow. I think I had that CD. With the before and after shot of Dresden, right? But in it all, I saw my own granulated past. A friend in high school, a waitress, a lab partner's boyfriend. I didn't want to be connected to them but I was. Some part of me from a long time ago was returning.

From one of those talks, I got news of the city. There was a curfew and it was being obeyed. Marchers clashed again with the police at the Roseway Bridge but no one was seriously hurt. Organizers were trying to keep things from getting out of hand, at least for the moment. But no one thought it was going to last.

"They talk about Manifestation night and day," said Coryn.

Daria said the government made it up, "It's like those old Bolsheviks in your bathroom posters—Be on your guard! Manifestation is all around you," she giggled, "It's totally postmodern."

Coryn said eight cell phones had been found but that there was supposed to be one more. "The infamous death phone Pluto," she filled a water glass with beer and shook her head, "It's fucking great. Every time someone pulls out a cell phone on a bus, people dive."

"Oh, god!" Daria laughed, "They totally made that up too! Shameless terror-mongering fuckers."

"Technically, Pluto's not even a planet," I added.

“Oh, I’m totally sure the moons of Jupiter are next.”

Daria got up to get a sweater. Coryn stretched, “Well, if there was another phone it probably got tossed.”

She drank the glass of beer and did a sun salutation in the hallway. Jules looked at the shiny black windows. His face reflected back in waves on the undulating glass. His cheek line was almost vertical in profile and the lenses of his eye, translucent. He looked at me several times but I ignored him. An understanding had grown up in the silence between us, that we don’t talk about it. I was off the hook somehow now anyway. I went upstairs to bed with two sets of eyes, his and Tamara’s on my back. I felt the phone in my bag wrapped in an unworn T-shirt. It had only been turned on once when I activated it with the others in the parking lot of the Village of Light Towne Square. A souvenir? A Genie’s lamp? I wasn’t sure myself why I still had it.

The next morning I walked out into the field and sat on an old carriage stone. Sleeping bags curled like maggots in the yard. I counted 21. The wet fog was about to burn off and the back edge of the slaughterhouse roof was streaked with sunlight. People had worked late into the night filling beer cans with gravel and taping them shut, hundreds and hundreds of them. They were stacked in boxes by the garage door and beside them buckets full of pulleys, bandanas and carabeners. The giant puppets were covered with tarp and their nametags wrapped in cellophane.

All day long people practiced chaining themselves to things or getting dragged like egg noodles over the yard because it looks so bad when they beat you and you’re all helpless and squishy like that.

“Future Christians,” was all Tamara had to say about it.

They ran the play. A short piece in which the Oil Baron and the Water Baroness were married on a logged and desolate hillside by the Deacon of Capitalist Expansionism. At the end they were going to scatter Fair Trade rice over the crowd.

I suggested they use deer teeth instead and gave them my jar.

Tamara said she’d rather get bones set than do political theater.

“I saw the Spectre of GMO Corn torn to shreds by police dogs though. That was pretty cool.”

She stuck with organizing medical supplies.

“They’re going to need it when they get the shit kicked out of them,” she said flipping through an illustrated book on minor surgeries.

“I think I could do that,” she said, pointing at an appendectomy.

Everything was hitting a peak. No one had slept well and everyone was cranky. Asher, who was newly trans, had been called Brianna one too many times and lashed out at some dumb college kid who’d followed his girlfriend there and made him cry. There were other things too, people throwing tools or yelling at someone for nothing. But it didn’t stay that way. Half the crews were leaving the next morning to organize bike brigades in the city, so as the puppets got finished and the supplies staged, the atmosphere turned from a frantic and stressful panic into a fevered debauchery.

It started around dusk when Marco and Coryn ran power to the yard, which was strewn with disassembled puppet legs and arms. They organized the sound and began to deejay. Nets of speaker wire glinted between the outbuildings as the sun set. The last bit of work, sorting the medical supplies by affinity group, was finished in the dark.

“This way they’ll at least have some gauze to staunch the flow,” said Tamara after handing out the last package.

Britta dragged a keg into an empty goat stall and turned the space between the garage and shed into homemade biergarten. People started changing clothes. From nowhere, out came the striped stockings, glitter, lace slippers and hidden jewelry. Dressing again, they braided their hair or cut it for no reason with stiff hands in the cold. No one could see. Jules lifted the garage door and a trapezoid of thin light fell over the driveway. He stood there in a cloud of breath.

Coryn found a wedding dress stuffed in a bag. It was huge, size 26 with a train. It had been for the puppet bride but they didn’t use it and she carried it to the garage and slipped it over her head. Jules cut a length of rope from some of the climbing supplies and tied it around her waist. She twirled, her cream hem rising and falling like a sin wave. Asher climbed into one of the Mercedes and flashed the headlights like a strobe while she danced.

“Black Francis!” yelled Asher, “Get the projector out!”

Francis hung sheets from the farmhouse windows and showed newsreels and industrial films. Lime and Gypsum, the heart of our nation. A breadbasket of waving grain. A boy in pink vinyl pants and gumdrop hair danced with Josephine Baker, jerking on the southeast wall.

Tamara asked me to climb up on the roof on the garage with her and I did.

Coryn circled beneath us in the wedding dress.

“They could do without plumbing but not hair dye.”

She twisted a piece of lavender hair around a finger. Her legs dangled off the roof. “I wish it were enough just to be alive,” she said.

I knew what she meant more than anything I had ever known.

She zipped up her sweatshirt and pulled the sleeves down over her fingers.

A girl with tangerine hair who reminded me of Jimmy went by and I wondered where she was, if she was still in Fair Prospect with her parents or already on a plane. Someone put on Stayin’ Alive and at first it was like a joke, then everyone went crazy. Francis jumped off a barrel onto the dirt, flailing like he’d been saved. Daria grabbed his hands and they swung each other around until they flew apart, then someone caught her and spun her the other way until she fell. Black Francis knocked over a stack of palettes and rolled onto his back laughing. I could hear him over the music, echoing on the tin siding of the garage.

People rushed the half-lit pit. But I saw the division like I always do. The axis of ironic response. Unfolding, the body of a butterfly. I fucking hate disco. What delicate wings. On one side, the actual impression. On the other a cunning replica. Jazz hands hooked at the thumbs, flapping across the driveway, a white bird. But I know what it means to crave what you’re not. To want to sew up that rift because it’s exhausting to hold it open. Sometimes you just need to be someone else, someone who doesn’t care about anything at all. I know I do. I want emptiness but I can’t have it. Marco turned the music up. Gumdrop hair stuttering in the high beams and flickering against the movie reels. Black Francis against the subsidized wheat. Asher in the fields of rice. The stars, dusty above. Tamara asked me to help her and Jules take out some

transmission lines heading south. I said yes. Every generation gets to decide their relationship with the universe. And, whether I liked it or not, this was my generation. In that way, I took the only path I could.