

ZAZEN

Ch 25—La Rue des Oiseaux

We drove past the airbase and Jules pointed to a line of gray planes.

“You can see some of them there,” he said, “When we come around you’ll see the rest.”

The road arced as we climbed out of the rain shadow channeled scablands. From a distance I could see that the whole compound was in a depressed basin. I imagined it a bowl of fire lighting the desert. Pink skies. Black smoke. It was getting dark and we turned around. The moon rose through the front windshield.

“There’s not much more to do,” said Jules.

He rolled the window down. The cold air was shrill in my ears.

When we walked into the farmhouse Tamara, Black Francis, Astrid and Britta were there. Everyone seemed to be waiting for me to say something. I got some water from the kitchen and drank it by the woodstove, listening to the embers crack inside.

“That’s pretty much it,” I said, “We’re as ready as we’re going to be.”

Tamara was thrilled. I wasn’t. I saw the power grid like a screen before us, currents flowing in all directions, televisions and respirators, barracks and airstrips all inseparable.

The New Land Trust action was only three days away. We decided to blow up the transmission tower at the same time to increase the level of distraction. We also wanted to associate the sabotaged tower with the New Land Trust demonstrations so that it would form a big arrow pointing toward the city and away from the airbase.

There was nothing left for me to do and I needed to get my things in order so Jules arranged a ride for me into the city. I would leave the night before the action and come back out the following week. When I got back we were going to prepare the Farm for winter and then figure out any future plans. Tamara thought it would be a good idea if we did something harmless and highly visible.

“ Like host an underground film festival. You know, something with bad animation and comments on the postmodern body.”

“I know a woman who does porn flicks in infrared,” I said.

Britta got excited.

“I totally know that chick too! She’s like the best grant writer on the planet.”

“Great,” said Tamara, “Let’s get her to curate. Maybe we can shoot video of a deer hunt and intercut it with an underage sex scene.”

Britta laughed, “We should get Desiree to do it. She looks like she’s fucking twelve anyway.”

“Oh, god yes!” said Tamara, “Put her in a training bra and some cotton underwear. Sure-fire boycott. That would be fucking perfect.”

From there the conversation debilitated into storyboarding tales of animal porn.

“No, no, wait!” yelled Tamara, her face red from laughing and tears running down her cheeks, “And after the goat scene, we have the subplot: He’s a vegan. She’s a Native American whale hunter. Can their love survive? I can see the final scene now: Clashing communities brought together by a violent white trucker who shoots a kid.”

Her blue eyes glittered and the feeling of familiarity was so strong I felt it in my body, an electromagnetic field between us.

We planned a whole six-month calendar of events. The film festival, a pie party, tutorials on butchering and canning—Tamara’s idea was that we make the Farm famous for irrelevant and controversial happenings. It was a pretty smart tact. Over the course of the night, she told me about 200 times how glad she was we met and how cool it was going to be to work together. Any regrets I had vanished.

The next morning Tamara and I went for a drive. She wanted me to survey the land by Wal-Mart that was out a little ways from Breaker’s Rise.

“Wouldn’t it be great if we could wait until they close and sink that thing about five feet into the ground?”

We were driving back from the hardware store. She had her feet up on the dash.

“I would fucking love that,” she said, tapping the window in cadence, “It would be perfect.”

“It’s stupid, it wouldn’t work,” I said, “Those things are single-story flat-bottom boats.”

I was in scientist mode and a little more dismissive than usual.

“Besides, it would take a zillion charges and wouldn’t do nearly as much a trashcan fire inside. They’re just like big tents. And even if you could figure out some way of doing it wouldn’t be worth it. It’s just a symbolic target.”

“Oh, you’re one to talk about symbolic targets,” she said sharply, “Fucking yoga studios and bubble tea?”

“Fuck you! I drew a picture. I pointed out the features of the problem as I saw it. I wasn’t planning to blow anything up for real. You did that. I didn’t ask you to and you didn’t have to.”

“Yeah well, you didn’t mind claiming our bombs.”

I pulled over on the snowy shoulder.

“Oh my fucking god!” I laughed, “You did not blow up the dog track! Did you? That’s so fucking unbelievably stupid. And the bathroom? What was that? A strike against plumbing?”

“What do you care?” she screamed, “You were talking about leaving the country. And if you didn’t want anyone to blow up stuff on your precious map then you shouldn’t have left it around everywhere. You wanted someone to do it for you. That’s why you’re here. You want someone to do what you’re too fucking chicken to do and then you want to pretend it wasn’t your idea.”

“Oh fuck this! I’m walking.”

I opened the door and Tamara backhanded me in the ribs. I probably should have figured it out then, what really connected me to her, that invisible string. My sister, my torturer, my hero at Pine Ridge. But I didn’t. I was distracted by what she said because it was true and I knew it. I did want someone to do something, and I didn’t want it to be my fault. I wanted everything to be okay, everything to change, and no one to get hurt. I was ashamed of myself.

I got out of the car and slammed the door.

Tamara slid into the driver’s seat and rolled down the window.

“You’re such a friggin’ pussy, Della.”

She turned over the engine and pulled up beside me, idling.

“I don’t care if you walk. I won’t blame myself at all.”

I kicked the driver’s side door. She rolled her eyes.

“Oh why don’t you just get in and stop being an ass?”

“Fuck off.”

“You want to race?” she revved the engine, “Come on John Henry, you can do it. Want to race?”

“Why are you so fucking stupid?” I screamed.

“Why are you so fucking sure you’re the only one having a hard time?”

Kimba eats glass. Tears of hate fall.

I glared at the frozen fields. Steam from the tailpipe billowed around the car. The road was empty for miles in either direction. I felt my pride like a prison.

Tamara killed the engine.

“Really,” she said, “Why do you think no one else is having hard time with all of this? Or that you’re the only one who hates it? Do you think I want to spend the winter eating canned fruit and deer jerky on a fucking farm waiting every night to see what bad thing is going to happen next?”

I realized that it had never really occurred to me that she had a problem with any of it.

“I’m staying because it’s the right thing to do,” she said hoarsely, “Because Jules and I made a commitment and because I want to wake up to something isn’t a fucking horror show of constant defeat.”

She blew into her hands and squinted at me.

“I don’t know what to do,” I said.

Those were words I don’t ever remember having said.

“That’s right,” she said, “None of us do and we’re all trying to figure it out together because there’s no other option.”

I let ignorance radiate. It was a quiet and gentle freedom, utterly foreign.

Tamara opened the passenger door, “It’s going to snow. Get in.”

Right then, I think I would have gone anywhere with her.

We got back just after lunch and the snow started. It was light and blew in swirls. Everyone was napping or reading or packing. The silence was so complete that when someone dropped a knife in the kitchen, even though I was outside, I heard it ring like a shot. I didn't feel like sitting down or sleeping so I went to the garage to find something to do. The green Mercedes Jules had been working on was in there and he'd left the hood up so I closed it. I turned the heater on and the light and sat down at the bench. Bags of salvaged nails, screws and washers sat unsorted on the worktable and I went through them.

I remembered Jules had been looking for registration paperwork on the yellow Mercedes. I thought it might have accidentally been put in with the slips on the green so I went through the glove box to see. Everything was in an envelope and I pulled it all out to look at it under the lamp. Old maintenance records, a receipt for an alternator, a mileage tracker, the registration for the green Mercedes. There was a sheet of folded paper. I opened it up and the other registration fell out. I was about to fold it back up when I saw the letterhead. It was a receipt from a travel agency for two tickets to Paris leaving in four days. Jules Kraka and Tamara Byrne. One-way. Direct to Heathrow and then continuing on to Charles de Gualle. I read the date again and again until my fingertips froze. They had been planning to leave all along.

I sat there for a while, then put the papers back and shut the glove box. When I stepped outside, snow powdered the driveway. The daylight hurt my eyes and I had to blink before they could focus. Desiree opened the kitchen door and saw me.

“Hey we're making pizza. Come get some,” she called.

Blonde hair in tight pigtails. Britta was right. She did look twelve.

I nodded. She closed the door. Smoke curled from the chimney.

Credence says I jump to conclusions. He says I never wait to find out the whole story. Maybe that's what Tamara meant once when she said that we'd all made hard decisions. Maybe she'd given up her escape and that's why she was so hard on other people about it. I could understand that. I don't know why she wouldn't have told me, but I could understand that. I looked at

the transaction date. They had bought the tickets only the week before. Right when we were choosing between the transmission towers.

I went to find Tamara.

Astrid was pulling two homemade pizzas out of the oven when I walked into the kitchen, which was warm and crowded.

“There’s a vegan and a cheese,” Astrid said and set the pizzas to cool on the stovetop.

I sat down to eat with everyone else. Astrid, Jules, Daria, Black Francis, Britta, Tamara, Desiree, Marco and Asher. Coryn was making a cobbler for later and ate standing by the butcher’s block.

Tamara was telling the story of how she met Black Francis. He’d been hitchhiking around, living off pharmaceutical studies. He’d gotten kicked out of a big study for taking acid and was stranded in Arizona. Tamara ran into him at an all-ages punk show that he was trying to scam his way into.

“So Francis was whining to the guy, telling him he should get in free because he had been using his body for drug tests as a profound act of social giving. ‘I’m fucking helping to cure cancer!’ It was so incredibly pathetic that I had to pay his way.”

Francis’s cheeks were red but he didn’t seem to mind. I looked at Tamara. She seemed relaxed. You can’t be relaxed when you’re lying to everyone and on the verge of fucking over all your friends.

After dinner Tamara stayed in the kitchen to do dishes. I stayed too. When they were done, she sat down.

“I wanted to talk to you about something,” she said.

My hope rose.

“It’s about this winter.”

My eyes stung.

“We’re going to have to work to frame the events so that people can take something real from them. There’s no real point if we just let it feed a media storm unquestioned. Maybe we could train others on the methods we used, if it works. You and I could do it together. People know me.”

Tamara reached across and grabbed the last pizza crust off my plate and ate it. The way she did it, like she didn’t have to ask, was just like Cady. And

that's when I got it, that buried wire. There were a million reasons why I was there, but only one I had never seen. I had been drugged by my own longing.

She picked up my plate and took it to the sink. I felt nauseous.

"Tamara, what's the hardest decision you ever made?"

"I don't know," she said with her back turned, "I haven't made it yet."

She poured herself some coffee and sat back down. I couldn't read anything in her expression.

"Well, did you ever think about leaving?"

She looked right at me.

"No," she said, "I never did. I don't believe there's anywhere to go."

"Never?"

She stirred sugar into her coffee.

"No. Never."

Tamara looked through a newspaper on the table. I felt like there was no air left in the room. Everything around me sharpened. I could see the bevels inside the wooden sashes of the kitchen windows and the coffee grounds on the floor across the room by the compost bucket.

"Well," she said, closing the paper and standing up, "I better get back to it."

I watched her stand and finish her coffee by the sink.

Credence says I don't give anyone a real chance. He says I act like people are either good or bad and there's nothing in between and no point where they could take a turn. What I loved about Tamara was the way she would take anyone on. It didn't matter who or how many. She was fearless. Sit there twisting a hank of lavender hair around her finger or painting her toes and suddenly say the smartest thing you ever heard. She had a brilliant natural mind. Just like my sister. But Cady was pitifully honest. A black rock in a bay. With her, you saw everything. Anyone could make her cry, but no one could get her to stop whatever she was doing. She'd tell you about it the whole way too, no matter how it cost her or what names she got called. That's how I knew her from all the others. A charcoal statue in the harbor. I guess we each have someone we don't see coming. Someone shaped like someone else we miss. I felt so stupid.

“I should go,” she said.

She and Jules were driving Desiree, Astrid and Britta to the bus station in Breaker’s Rise. On the way back they were going to pick up some stuff we forgot earlier. I told her I wanted to take a walk and followed her out the kitchen door, heading out over the field. The flurries thickening around me.

I came to the slaughterhouse, the oldest structure still standing, and bent to tighten my bootlaces. My fingers were red and I was crying. I couldn’t untie the knot. My nose got stuffed up and I sat. The car started in the driveway. I clawed at the knot and tore my thumbnail. Tiny red droplets speckled the snow as I shook my hand.

“Hey Della,” Tamara yelled across the yard, “Do you need anything from town?”

I didn’t answer her. Just sat down on a rock next to the slaughterhouse door. Old red bricks littered the ground by my feet where part of the wall had collapsed a while back. That’s where I was when they left. Tamara called my name again and waved. I saw her get in the car smiling. I should throw a brick at her, I thought.

I watched them drive away and nearly threw up. They weren’t about making things better at all. They fucking knew that blowing up planes was a game changer and they were going to Paris. I grabbed the biggest brick I could find and threw it. It landed 20 yards away and disappeared in the snow. I grabbed another and threw that one too. Fucking dog tracks and film festivals. Transmission lines and airbases. It wasn’t about building anything. It was about getting away with it and proving you were smarter than everyone else. I got up and kicked the slaughterhouse door. They’d be in France, watching the fallout. I kicked the door again and the latch broke. I might be a coward for thinking about leaving but at least I wouldn’t take down the few weight-bearing walls on my way out, the frail shims, matted grassroots swollen and floating in the water. I would at least have left behind something to cling to. Even if it wouldn’t have kept me afloat, I wouldn’t take it from someone else. Not if I wasn’t staying.

I threw up on the snow and wiped my mouth on a frozen rag left on the ground. It tasted like blood and I threw up again. There was no way that

Britta or Astrid or the others knew. Tamara didn't like Astrid and she didn't trust Britta. I'll find Coryn, I thought, and Daria. I'll tell them. But what was I going to say? So there's this action that you may or may not know about and I really hope neither of you are cops or that you aren't friends with anyone who might be because I'm going to put a whole bunch of other people at risk by telling you this but...when I didn't really even know what was going on. I had to calm down and figure it out. I had to come up with a plan.

Or maybe I didn't.

I put snow on my face to cool it. While I was there a small yellow car started coming down the long driveway toward the farmhouse. I watched it without thinking. It was an old Toyota or Honda or something with shot suspension, shaking on the dirt road and jerking in the potholes. I started walking back. I didn't give a fuck who was coming. Fucking puppeteers, bloggers and future law students. I passed a goat and hissed at it like a cat. Tawny eyes with thick black strikes. That's what Tamara should fucking have.

I was almost to the kitchen door when the yellow car stopped by the garage and a young man got out. I could see his brown shoulder length hair but didn't recognize him at first. I pulled on the kitchen door.

"Della," he called, "Wait."

He loped toward me. I remembered him, some friend of Desiree's from college named Bradley. He'd come through a few days earlier with some of the bike brigade organizers.

"Yeah?" I said.

"I left some textbooks and a pair of jeans drying by the fire. Have you seen them?"

"Whatever. I don't know. Go look around."

I let him go ahead of me and walked into the house, which was quiet.

"Is Marco here?" he asked, "I think I left the books in his room."

I vaguely remembered Tamara saying Marco and the others going to help Francis cut a new trail between his yurt and a different part of the creek.

"No. It's just me. Go look through his room."

He got his things and was on the way out when the idea hit me.

"Hold on," I said.

I gave him fifty dollars for gas and asked him to wait. I ran upstairs, grabbed my GPS, my rock hammer and my notes. I wrapped them in my red corduroy dress and jammed them into my messenger bag and whatever didn't fit I left. In the side pocket was the Pluto phone. I pulled it out, turned it on for 30 seconds and back off.

Next, I went to Jules's room and looked through every drawer until I found his passport. It was in an envelope with his birth certificate and I took them both. I went to Tamara's room and did the same.

My last sight of the farm was through the back window of Bradley's yellow 1981 Toyota as it crested Breaker's Rise.