

ZAZEN

26—Road to Laos

I put the two passports and the birth certificate in a double sealed plastic bag with the last Hive phone, Pluto, and threw them in the river. I admit I blew a little air into the bag a little before I sealed it. Not enough to make it balloon, just enough to let fate take it one way or another. Then I called Star Bank Plaza One Visa and told them my card was stolen.

“How long ago?”

“At least a couple of weeks, maybe a month,” I said, “I didn’t realize it until I called to check the balance. I got some cash out when I first got the card but I haven’t used it since. The last time I remember seeing it for sure was when I stopped for gas in a town called Breaker’s Rise.”

“Did you use it there?”

“No ma’am, the machine was down. I paid cash.”

They said they would cancel the card, send me another and have a company investigator contact me. I destroyed my notes and maps. Shred them to spaghetti at the brand new Fed Ex/Kinkos/KFC. Then I pulled the SIM card out of my personal cell phone and donated it to a women’s shelter.

Maybe Cady would have turned out just like Tamara and maybe not. There’s no way of knowing. I like to think she wouldn’t have. I like to think she would have been there that day in the car with me heading away from Breaker’s Rise. I almost pretended she was but I knew I couldn’t do that because she wasn’t and that kind of fantasy leads nowhere.

When Credence saw me, he said I looked a little feral but otherwise okay.

“Healthier, maybe even. Not bad.”

But he didn’t mean it.

“Kind of like when you first came back from Davis.”

Right after they blew up a building full of school kids and I lost my mind?

“There’s a blush,” he said and touched my cheek with the back of his fingers, “Why do you think that is?”

“Must be that combination of science and emotional torment.”

“Really?” he asked.

“No. Just a bunch of hippy drama.”

The Czarina of Saturniidae flutters upward in a spiral of painted wings.

“Oh well, I guess that’s unavoidable,” he said and finished his coffee.

Hey, well everybody I got to go. They’re having a sandpainting contest down the street and I think I got a chance. Wish me luck! And, oh by the way, say hi to Grace and Miro if they ever come down from the mountain. I’d sure like to know what they think about all this. Maybe have them leave a note.

I stood. I didn’t owe any of them anything. Not even an explanation. I went to my bank, fucking temple of predation that it was, and withdrew all my money. Since I had been living on the cash from the credit card, I had several paychecks in there and some savings. I caught a bus down to the travel agency in Redbird Square. They were having a sale on getting the hell out.

The window of the agency been redecorated with American eagles enjoying the wonders of Southeast Asia. White sand. Straw huts. Indonesian Sex Trade Barbie waits attentively on two birds of prey in festive shirts.
PARADISE... IS ONLY AN OCEAN AWAY.

“You know we’re providing a list of realtors now with every ticket to Bali.”

The travel agent with the coral skin was standing behind me with a red, white and blue slush-puppy in hand and digging for her keys.

“We have a very popular package right now where local realtors actually meet you at the airport.”

“I need a ticket to Laos.”

In Laos there’s a Plain of Jars where a race of giants kept their rice wine. The vats are carved of stone, some weigh over two tons and the land around them is pocked with bomb craters, trench systems, urns and shrapnel. I thought it might be comforting to be surrounded by the ruins of another civilization.

“I’ll have to let the computer warm up,” the agent said once we were inside.

I noticed one of the desks had several eagles in Hawaiian shirts lying on their backs with talons clawing the air. She set the slush-puppy on the other desk.

“That’s my next little project. It’s for our Hawaiian packages. I already have the slogan.”

A FOREIGN LAND...RIGHT HERE AT HOME.

I had a vision of little dark-skinned people getting sprayed by police gunfire, miniature sweatshops and border patrol but that’s not what they meant.

“What about Guam?” I said, “It’s almost a state. Best of both worlds.”

“We did Guam for Fourth of July. I wanted to do a military base, like a cute flyboy World War II theme, but we’d just done that for Japan.”

The travel agent handed me a Lao tourist map of famous Buddhas, each one a gold triangle in a tangle of farm routes.

“These are good if you’re interested in culture.”

“Nope.”

She handed me another. *Rivers: The Interstate of Laos*, which was much better. She tried to hand me some city maps but I told her I’d make those myself.

“Aren’t you the little adventurer,” she said when I signed the paperwork.

I stopped into work to get a free meal. Mirror was in the kitchen eating raw tofu out of a five-gallon tub with her hands. She asked me what I thought of the Farm, wrist-deep in milky water. I told her it was a lot like what I grew up around.

“Yeah,” she swallowed a chunk of raw tofu the size of a golf ball, “Jimmy says your parents are pretty fringe. Were they like total hippies?”

“No, my parents blew up hippies.”

“For fucking real?” she threw the half eaten tofu back in the bucket, “Did they really blow up hippies?”

“No. But they would have if they thought it was necessary for the revolution.”

She thought about it for a second.

“Wow. That’s intense. What are they like now?”

“Pretty much the same.”

“That’s cool,” she said and wiped her hands on a dirty apron by the register, “I’d blow up a hippy if I had to too.”

I looked into the gulf for minute and thought about whether to tell her what I really thought. I wanted to explain to someone why I was leaving. Why I couldn’t be a part of it anymore, or a part of anything. We just sent in tanks and swept some foreign valley until it was soundless and still. A spokesman called it a clear victory for local democracies. I saw a picture of it in the paper. It looked like empty grassland when we were done. I closed my eyes. I saw thousands of baby rats weaving through the rye and clover. Would I start there? Or at the box-mall-church, or the Farm or France?

Mirror said Mr. Tofu Scramble was gone. I sat at the counter across from his empty seat making my packing list. At lunch, Ed Logic’s Only Son came in and sat in Mr. Tofu Scramble’s chair. He made a big show out of it, leaned back in the seat and ordered coffee. BLT on rye. Extra bacon. I thought about telling him the chair was goddamned deathtrap and that the co-pays for the pain meds alone would kill him. But I just I let him lean against the creaking Hellmouth and after a while he slunk back into his old seat and wiped the counter clean where he had been.

Mitch set his the BLT down in front of him.

“So I guess he really left, eh?” he said, looking over at me.

“Yup. Bali. Or Thailand, I don’t remember”

“Bali,” he pulled a mint toothpick out of his pocket, “Didn’t think he’d actually do it,” he said and tore the paper from his toothpick.

He looked like he was about to cry.

“Oh, Della,” Mitch said through the kitchen window, “I almost forgot. Tamara called looking for you. She said she’d call back.”

“Cool,” I said, “I want to talk to her too. I have a new cell, let me write it down.”

I looked up the number for the regional offices of the FBI then passed it through the window to Mitch.

“Here, be sure to tell her to call me. I’ll definitely be around.”

On my way home I passed Devadatta. She was looking at an advertisement for a cruise line.

“Be a Part if It All” was written in pink script on an azure sky. A bald eagle circled the “A.” The cruise ship was as white as a glacier and salmon jumped metallic and frisky around the prow.

“Those things are awful,” she said.

“Floating zone of faunal annihilation.” I pointed to the rippling currents behind the ship, “If you look closely you can see a skull on fire,” I outlined a shape on the surface of the water, “I knew a clown who worked a cruise once. None of his clown friends would talk to him afterwards.”

“I can’t understand why anyone would go on one of those. I think a lot of people are human for the first time. Maybe that’s why there are so many of us right now. I’m trying to practice opening my heart. It’s probably pretty hard to be human if you haven’t been before.”

Devadatta shifted the strap of her shoulder bag. The spine of a Biochemistry textbook showed inside.

“Would you go?” I asked, “Not on a cruise, I mean but leave for real?”

“I’ve got another year of school. I’d want to be able to work. I hear they need nurses everywhere,” she said, “So I’d wait.”

I thought I heard her voice waver but it might have been my imagination. My plane left the next day. I didn’t see any reason to tell Credence and Annette beforehand. It was like with Mirror, there was no starting point for that conversation. I’d be gone before the argument took hold.

I walked into the house at dinnertime. They were in the kitchen. Credence had his cheek pressed against Annette’s belly. She was sitting at the table with her chair turned sideways and he was on his knees. Violet and blue dusklight from the western window crossed them. Credence’s face and hands, one on Annette’s shoulder and another on her knee, looked like they were carved of Sandalwood.

Dear Fellow Travelers and Attending Bellyfish,

While in earlier communiqués I hinted that the time had come to sever myself from your guidance, I must now make good and leave.

May we all meet one day on the banks of a river that flows through a country, which is neither Old nor New Honduras and celebrate our re-emergence as citizens, lovers and family.

Until then, I will try to find a cheap cell phone plan with International coverage and no roaming charges.

Yours endlessly,

Friend of the Tiny Liver Hearts

Daughter of the Rat Queen

Nothing encouraging about the resiliency of life as it re-colonizes a wasteland—the sprig amidst the pumice; the independent coffee shop between outlet stores. I wanted something hopeful like that but I couldn't really think of anything I could stand behind. Goodbye. I love you. Get out while you can. I am. Della.

The next morning the sun shone down on the progressive micro-economy of New Honduras. It glinted off the environmentally sound building materials and played on the gutters and disconnected downspouts of Colony of the Elect. I walked down the wide wooden steps of Credence and Annette's house dragging a duffle bag behind me. I counted the leaves that blew across my path until there were too many to keep track of.

On the bus out to the airport I passed the new supermarket. All mud and sparkling windows. And Jimmy's apartment, which was probably already rented out for three times as much as she paid for it. They were stringing razor wire along the roofs of several buildings and it flashed in white ribbons as we drove by.

The three women in front of me were talking about the big demi-anniversary sale at Walmart and how they'd gotten time off from their cleaning jobs and were going down together.

“Is it that big?” I asked

“Oh yeah,” they said, “50% off all children’s clothes, shoes and school supplies.”

Everything Else=Box of Tampons.

“Got to get there early though.”

Or they’ll stop selling you cheap shit made by slaves and cared for by cannibals who’d fish out their own pancreas if you gave them a hook? It was just another reason I didn’t mind leaving.

Two miles from the airport we hit a checkpoint. Crickets everywhere. Fluttering and jumpy, they made us all get off the bus. They wanted to know about our travel plans. I told them I was going to look at rocks. And then briefly described the fascinating process of marine sediment deposition, lithification and the general tendencies of limestone erosion. I was in the middle of explaining the intricacies of stochastic modeling for background extinction and why I wanted to see the metamorphic rocks of the Sop Phan Formation—which are considered Neoproterozoic-Early Cambrian in age—when they stopped me.

“Purpose of your trip?”

“Fun,” I said.

They stamped my hand and moved me on.

Those final miles all I could think of were the Bellyfish and how I hadn’t finished the bathroom tile mosaic and as we came into the terminal I felt like a fish myself, near the water at last.

The airport was packed. Some people were leaving the country but many, many more were fleeing inward, away from the urban centers, scrambling up onto the continental plate. I walked up to a wall of airline agents ticking away at their computers. Looming behind them were Pan-Asian girls with welcoming lips, Navajo Sunsets and Maori whale hunters poised to strike. E-ticket kiosks were in rows to my left and I picked one near a poster of Tlingit Shaman and printed my boarding pass. Della Mylinek. Flight #222 to Bangkok. Continuing on to wherever.

After clearing security, I still had hours to kill. I mapped the public art (treating it as a permineralization of outdated thought and culturally relating it

to the nearest food court) and I shopped online at the business center. I got Devadatta a molecular model set with glow-in-the-dark carbon atoms and ordered a case of Rice Krispies for Annette. For Mirror, I got a rock-climbing manual with a lot of good tips on stable rigging.

I was starting to feel a little better. Like it was all a normal thing. Leaving the country after a long stint at school. Sending presents to friends. Missing a devastated homeland, which had been crushed to filaments under the wheels of unchecked hyper-mobile Imperial capital.

I ate caramel corn and watched TV because there was nowhere to sit where one wasn't on. The bomb threats were getting out of hand. They were getting called in everywhere. People who had a court date called them into the courthouse; people who didn't want to go to work called them in at their jobs. School kids called the schools. It was the best goodbye I could think of. One guy who had had an intervention done on him actually called in one to the rehab he had agreed to go to.

Sales were falling and they were running profiles on patriotic shoppers. Trotting out the last three independent business owners, each a Black Rhinoceros of the Serengeti, grazing numbly in the hinterlands, they put them in front of the cameras crying. Small businesses, they mewled, small businesses—but they kept getting cut off by ads for the Walmart's Demi-Anniversary sale so it was hard to hear them.

Somewhere about hour 3 they ran a promo for a show on the school bombing from the previous year, the one that happened when I was at Davis. Something in my mind flickered but I couldn't touch it. My heart started to beat faster. And it missed, which felt like swallowing but it wasn't swallowing. They said something about my flight over the PA but I couldn't hear it because I was at a different gate so I walked out into the terminal mall.

All persons traveling to Bangkok on flight 222, all persons traveling to Bangkok. Flight 222 is delayed. Please stay near your gate for further updates, all persons traveling on flight 222 to Bangkok.

I tried to focus on the color of the carpet and the sound of the jets taking off in the distance but something was pulling at me, something Tamara said about how symbols matter more than anything because it's the only real

language we have left. How it's the only thing with any poetry in it and how history is really just a map of the destruction and creation of symbols. And I was thinking about it when they showed that promo for the special on the anniversary of the school bombing because that's the day I picked when the war started and I thought about how she was right even though I told her she was wrong. I picked that day because it was a symbol. Something awful, uncontrollable and random. And then I thought about something else she said. She said people would rather fund an empire than pay two cents more for plastic bags and she was right about that too because I saw it on the Wal-Mart campaign when we were standing out there with our leaflets and free coffee that tasted like water. I saw it then and that's why I left. Tamara said it. Nothing would ever change until they saw what the real price was, right when they ran their cards.

I walked between the terminals, getting on and off the conveyors and counting the replicas of clustered businesses at the end of each spur. But it wasn't until I was sitting back at the gate, watching my sixth hour of television that I realized what was going to happen. Tamara and Jules were going to blow-up the Walmart near Superland™. They were going to do it on the day of the sale when all those kids are there. Just like that school and how it all happened last year. They were going to do it like I said, a trashcan fire in a tent, a bomb in the center because you'd never outrun the smoke with forty aisles of junk in every direction. It was a deathtrap. And more than that, it was a symbol. One you could even see from the golden valleys of France.

I ran to the payphones and called the Farm. Desiree answered. She said everyone had gone back to town to prepare for the action. I called Tamara's cell phone but it had been disconnected. I called Mirror. She answered with her mouth full and I had to tell who it was twice.

"They're saying you're a cop, dude," she said and swallowed.

"Listen, I need to find Tamara or Britta or Jules or any of them. Are they staying with you?"

"Seriously dude, are you a cop?"

"Are they staying with you? Do you know where they are? Would you please just tell me?"

“No—“

I hung up.

I looked around for crickets. They were everywhere, chirping and eating their young. I ran up to one and told him that I knew someone who was going to blow-up the Walmart.

“What? You need a day off too?” he laughed, licking decayed plant matter off his forewing, “You should just be glad you have a job.”

The police operator said the same. I called the cable news desk too but I knew they wouldn’t report it. For the past several days they had been following two immigrant families around while they shopped at threatened stores. The head of the Church of Enlightened Capital had been on every station preaching about the fearlessness of the American Consumer. They weren’t going to do anything.

They began boarding my flight. I looked at the crickets and the TVs and the food courts (a new Internationalism emerging phoenix-like, a multi-ethnic piazza of Food Service of America chattel) and the people passing in front of me that were like strangers.

I owed them nothing. I ran to my gate. They called my row and I got in line. I gave my ticket to the gate attendant and she circled my seat number. She had wrinkles around her mouth and orange lipstick and I wanted to ask her why she was still staying around because I couldn’t see why anyone would.

Tamara said I only stayed to make my mark. She said it after I showed her the article in *Paleobiology*; that I wanted to scratch my name in the cement just like a kid. I was on that thin bridge between the plane and the terminal thinking about that when I turned around and started walking back up toward the gate. Because Tamara was wrong. I wanted no part of any of it. Nothing. I didn’t want any action I had ever done etched on this awful scabland including the decimation of a fucking Walmart.

I told the woman with the orange lipstick that I had changed my mind and took one last look down the carpeted gangway and ran, leaving my luggage behind. Down the center of the terminal mall, down the escalators and through the shiny phone bank rings by baggage claim I went, out the doors

and onto the street. Where I caught a taxi back to town as planes arced above me flying pools of light over the Black Ocean.