

ZAZEN

Ch 27—The Batholith

It was night when I left the airport. The stars were clear and sharp through the taxi window and the terminal glowed behind, a swimming pool in the dark. We climbed out of the valley, angling through the traffic and broke free for several miles before hitting the next checkpoint where we waited, with Bhangra rhythms pattering in the dashboard while the crickets asked us questions before careening again along the old rural highways and arterials past Pretty Little Hopes and toward the South Mall Hills.

I didn't try to stop my thoughts from racing. Instead, I directed them into the commercial intertidal zone where Walmart was and tried to come up with a plan.

I had some cash, an old credit card, a field journal and an English-Lao dictionary. Everything else was in my luggage. The cab driver said he knew a cheap motel near Superland™ and I asked him to take me there. It was called the Welcome Home. It was about half a mile from Walmart in the center of the Blackberry Massacre. Opposite the motel was a Holiday Inn Business Express and at the last minute the cabbie tried to get me to stay there but I assured him I much preferred the independently owned meth lab across the street and that's where he dropped me.

The woman who checked me in was flat-faced and part Samoan. She asked where my luggage was and I said the airline lost it. She smiled and pulled out a white plastic tub full of toiletries for sale and let me pick through for my favorite color of toothbrush. She didn't have any knives or duct tape though which was a shame cause it meant I'd have to buy them at Walmart.

“What time's the curfew?” I asked.

“8pm unless you're shopping. Then you got to show a receipt.”

It was 8:30.

Value Town Outlet Parkway was quiet. A strange wind seemed to come from passing cars and the regularity of the architecture, like it was a box canyon with its own weather. I pushed my hair out of my face several times

but it kept blowing forward and I gave up, letting it whip my cheeks or float down over my shoulders in the sudden still and silent air.

Ahead lay the Batholith, Walmart. Cars dotted the parking lot and security cruised the lanes. I hadn't been there since the final days of the campaign when everything tanked and we were just hanging out for the ribbon cutting, watching it like a traffic accident. The last thing Credence had us do was to try to get future shoppers to sign onto a petition to "hold the company accountable to fair community standards." Credence loved that, "fair community standards," it was like some kind of organizer porn to him. As if everyone was going to sign that thing and suddenly discover their place in the constellation of class oppression. Little stars! Little stars! Blanched and a-tremble; unpattern yourselves—and each petition, a prairie fire and all the signatures precious birds fallen and feeble rescued from the threadbare nest and carried gently home. Holding the hand of the dying. That's what we were doing.

I came to it. Crowning failure with more failure. Walmart. In front of me, made of fake rock, unremarkable and low to the ground. I tried to focus only the physical appearance. Observe it as I would a trace fossil, a burrow. The white block letters, the teal background and a main entrance in front with a door on either side. It was constructed by a method in which the walls were poured then raised (by Egyptians) and structurally bound together by the roof. I heard that the fire department hates that kind of building but it's cheap and fast. Inside, there are five acres of retail space. The ceilings are about 15 ft high and in the case of a moderate blast I imagined that smoke would race along the flame retardant panels until it hit the walls and moved down in a convective pattern to the floor and back up making the exits the most deadly place to be in an explosion. Outside of the initial blast zone, that is.

I went through the main door and was confused by the brightness. I pulled out my notebook while my eyes adjusted and drew a box on the page with parallel scratches for the doors I had just come through. Then I meticulously walked up one aisle and down another making notes. In the middle of the household chemical/infant-toddler aisle a manager approached me. He was skinny with a tan hair, acne scars and cornflower blue eyes.

“Can I help you?” he asked, “What is it you’re looking for?”

A Candyland Ride through the Slaughterhouse?

“A knife and some duct tape.”

He pointed me down a row and I went, counting the aisles and adjusting my sense of the floor plan. The center of the store was an intersection of accessories, electronics, small appliances and ladies’ wear. A bomb in a backpack would do it. Especially if the ceilings were dropped and there was a strong supply of oxygen through the duct system.

I could easily see it on fire. The wicker dogs, the prom dresses, the camouflage strollers burning. It was beautiful and I couldn’t remember why I wanted to stop it. I think that if I had a bag full of explosives, I might have let it slip, or forgotten it by the greeting cards and silver balloons with the super heroes on them and the ribbons trailing down to tie the fat baby hands to a generation of merchandising, I might have left it there. But I didn’t have a backpack with a bomb in it and if anybody was going to blow up the Superland™ Walmart, it was going to be me. Not some fucking crusty punk.

I grabbed the duct tape, a decent pocketknife and left. There wasn’t much I could do that night anyway. Glance at the outside. Think. Everything else would have to wait until morning.

I slept with the sound of Vietnamese television coming through the walls and someone crying on the phone outside. Twice, I woke up thinking I was in Laos. When the sun finally did rise, I opened my eyes as if I had just shut them during a moment of uninterrupted thought. I washed with cold water, brushed and braided my hair and crossed the street for a continental breakfast at the Holiday Inn Business Express. There, I drank reconstituted orange juice with some low-level drug company reps and tried to clear my mind.

The New Land Trust Action was that day but I felt pretty certain that without the power outage at the airbase, not much would happen. And if it did, it wouldn’t be on me. That whole thing may never have been real at all. I didn’t know. There was also the possibility that Tamara and Jules might not even know yet that I’d stolen the passports, especially if they hadn’t packed and were planning one final trip back through the Farm. They might still

think they were leaving and going to land, exiles fresh upon the Boulevard and that thought filled me with bliss but it had its dangers too because if they still thought they were getting out, they might act more viciously. Either way, I needed to prevent them from entering the Walmart or get it evacuated if they did. My plan was to stay near the two main store entrances and look for anyone from the Farm going in or out. I was sure Tamara would be there. She couldn't help herself.

Steam rose from the Walmart as the dew on the perforated metal siding evaporated in the morning sun. It was two hours before the store opened and the employees were already gathered outside. They shivered a little and some jumped up and down to keep warm while the manager, a tall man bald and shiny, read off the sales numbers from the previous day. Then he shouted out the national daily target and they got in a team huddle, did an Indian Dance for greater poverty and went in.

I was standing near an embankment on the west side of the parking lot about a hundred feet from the doors. Ugly tight shrubs grew behind me, dense and tangled with beer cans. I sat down on the curb and waited. I killed twenty minutes wrapping my hands, like a boxer, in duct tape for no reason at all.

The shoppers started coming. A huge SUV blocked my vision and I had to move a little further back up the embankment to see. There were carloads of Mexicans with teenage children in sparkling T-shirts, pink and turquoise, laughing and swatting at each other and swinging mesh shopping bags. There were Ukrainian women wearing scarves pushing white haired boys and black kids in close packs. There were metal chicks with tiny purses smoking cigarettes, guys just out of the army and everywhere, snarling siblings and strollers dragged by dazed white women, fat and depleted, to the front entrances of the store like it was a boat that could save them if they could only get on. They spilled out of the cars so fast my eye couldn't track them.

The doors were still locked. The manager I'd seen earlier was beaming on the other side and pointing to his watch. People pressed up against the glass as he began to unlock the first door. I walked along a lane of parked cars trying to keep an eye on both entrances. The manager unlocked the second

door. The crowd split in two and moved forward. More people were coming every minute, like it was a hanging or something. More and more and more people and I couldn't keep my eye on all of them. Watching the whole crowd was now impossible so I decided to get closer to the doors.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a pink-skinned girl with red hair. I moved toward her but she turned away. I crossed in front of a line of trucks and saw her ahead of me. She was working her way into the crowd. I pushed through into the center but couldn't catch up. Someone bumped me from behind and I tripped and people just flowed around me as if I were a rock in a river. When I got up, the crowd had shifted and she was by the door. I could see her face, her clear gray eyes.

It was Britta.

A few seconds later, I saw Astrid. She was in another part of the crowd heading toward the second door. An icy feeling came over my chest and ran down my arms. The skin on my head tingled like I was on speed. My eyelids were on fire. They were really going to do it.

Britta moved toward to the door on the right and Astrid to the one on the left. I was still about forty feet back, stuck in the crowd. I would never make it to the doors in time to stop them. I started yelling. It was all I could think of, to try to scare them off somehow.

"Britta!" I screamed, "Britta!"

Britta turned, her skin red and her jaw clenched. She looked right at me.

"Britta!" I yelled and the person next to me told me to shut up.

"Britta!"

She looked around quickly then began moving sideways through the crowd towards Astrid. I had never really let it in, what it would feel like to watch something like that, a real bomb exploding around real people. As Britta got nearer to Astrid and the crowd pushed them closer to the doors my hope dissolved.

I elbowed my way in and cut to the right.

"Astrid!" I screeched and someone shoved me.

They threatened to call security and I told them to do it.

“Astrid! Astrid! Britta! Astrid!”

Astrid stopped moving, her blonde hair lank and scanned the parking lot. She saw me and she saw Britta coming towards her. I could see her lips whiten. She stood still and waited. They reached each other long before I got to where they were. And by then, they were out of the crowd walking fast toward the far right corner of the lot. I could see the green Mercedes parked by a lamppost. I finally got through the crowd and ran after them but they were in the car and pulling out before I even got close. I yelled their names one last time as they drove away but they never looked back.

I was shaking and coughing, mostly from fear. I leaned over with my palms on my thighs and tried to catch my breath. The air felt like glass knives. I swallowed a couple of times to wet my throat then stood up. I had been crying and didn't know it. My nose was stuffed up and my face was hot and wet.

I turned back to the store. The front of it was swarmed and security was making people form lines but there were too many of them so the knots at the doors just tightened. I started walking the perimeter in a semi-circle to where I was before. I didn't think Britta or Astrid would come back but I had to stay for a while to make sure. After that it was somebody else's problem.

I pulled a muffin from the Holiday Inn out of my bag thinking I could eat it but I couldn't and put it back. Not until the adrenaline left my body, which would take a while. I could feel it beginning though. Someone passed me with a cart full of disposable electronics, steaks and diapers. That's when I remembered that it was the great maggot feast day and I didn't want to be there anymore. I was so pissed off I started to cry again.

People were acting like idiots. I pushed one of them from behind, a big old jock. I told him he stepped on my foot. It wasn't true but I felt better. It helped me turn the corner. Ten minutes later I was almost okay. I reminded myself, I was beholden to nothing. I didn't live anywhere. I walked faster, skirting the heart of the crowd. I might even be on a plane that night.

There was a loud noise by the front entrance. Someone knocked over a barbeque grill and someone else was freaking out about it. I glanced up just in time to see Tamara slip in through the glass doors. She had a red backpack and

her lavender hair was in pigtails. She was chatting with the security guard while she waited for the line to move.

I just stood there. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't breathe.

She looked right at me and smiled before disappearing into the store.

**BITCH! FUCKING BITCH! FUCKING VANGUARD BULLSHIT
POSER MOTHERFUCKING BITCH!**

I ran as fast as I could for the doors but security stopped me. I told them there was a girl with a backpack, 5'5, purple hair and that she had a bomb but they didn't believe me. Told me to wait in line. I pushed my way through to the other side and they grabbed me before I got there.

"Get a manager!" I said, "That tall guy I saw earlier. Or a cop, something!"

And they dragged out an assistant manager but he said they expected bomb threats on big sale days. I tried to tell them that this was different but they wouldn't listen. They just thought I was a meth-head or something and the silver tape on my hands didn't help.

I turned around and went back into the crowd and started telling the people in line. There's a bomb in there, I said, a big one and I saw the girl take it in and she'll do it. I know her—but right then the manager got on a bullhorn and announced that the store was filling up and they were going to have to start turning people away and, hearing that, people just blew past me with their eyes on the door and there was nothing I could say to stop them. Up front, the security guards were breaking out the liability waivers and people were signing them as fast as they could. Can one count for my whole family? Sure.

And I got in line too and forced my way closer to the front. A guy behind me started shouting, calling me names but I kept moving until I was about ten feet from the doors. A guard handed me a white sheet of paper saying it wasn't their problem if the store blew up and I put an "X" on it and threw it back at them and was about to go through the glass doors when the tall manager came out. He said the store was full and that no one could go in until other shoppers left.

I told him he had to let me in, that my friend was inside and I didn't want to get separated. I said she my asthma medication and I was having trouble breathing but he didn't believe me because I was shouting and people said they'd seen me running and that I was cutting in line. So I said please, please, I'm not lying but a security guard came over and told him I was making bomb threats earlier and the tall manager put his hand on my shoulder. It smelled like baby powder and he told me to calm down or they were going to have to ask me to leave. Then I said the real reason was that the girl in the store was my sister and that she was a junkie and had just gotten out of jail for theft and that I didn't want to see her go back and that I saw her go in with a backpack and that I knew it was empty and that I was sure she was going to steal a whole bunch of stuff because she was good at it and they almost let me in but then they said no. And I said please, please, please let me in and the tall manager put his hand on my shoulder again and someone behind me said I was probably trying to get to get at the kids clothes before they ran out and I said I didn't have any kids and I told the manager I would leave them my bag and my ID if they'd just let me find her and that I would be quiet as a mouse because I was screaming then, and that I would buy diamonds and detergent and that it would only take a minute if they let me and they told me to step back. The guard's hand was on my chest and he said to calm down and I said I would and walked away, apologizing, with my eyes darting through the crowd. I tried to make myself breathe evenly even though I was terrified and no one would do anything.

A white bus pulled up with New Life Community Church stenciled on the side. Kids poured out. They were just handing out those waivers left and right, passing them up and down the line. Little white papers, little doves, fluttering over the crowd of children and everyone laughing and excited like it was their birthday or something. Another bus pulled up behind that one and I thought, I should leave. I should leave before it happens because no one's going to do anything and I don't have to watch.

I paced back and forth on the edge of the lot while I tried to think of something. I had to because it was my fault. If I hadn't let Tamara take the map, if I hadn't put the Walmart right there in the center of it like it was the

mountain at the heart of the world I wouldn't be there. I wiped my face on my shirt. Shopping carts piled high with the debris of nations rolled past and they let a few more people inside. Tamara wasn't out yet so there was still time. I knew she'd never blow herself up. Self-preservation was a religion with her. I started walking down towards the parking lot but as soon as I got too far away to see the doors I ran back up to where I was. I tried to take a long breath but couldn't hold it and coughed, gagging on the air.

More busses came with more children. They were bringing them in from all over the city. An hour must have passed while I was walking in small circles and Tamara still hadn't come out. I know because I was looking for her so hard my eyes ached. I knew she'd have to come back through those doors. And when she did I'd know it was about to happen and I could prepare myself. Because I wasn't prepared before. An undergrad told me, a pudgy girl with thick blonde hair walking back to her dorm. She said some people took over a grade school thousands of miles away. That there were hundreds of kids in it and that they were going to blow it up. It was like some sort of holiday or birthday. They were all waiting for something to start when it happened. And I didn't think they'd do it. I didn't think they'd actually blow up that school with all those babies in it. All on their birthdays, dressed for a party, I didn't think they would but they did.

I tried to map the cultural trends leading up to it but as I did they grew, interconnecting and weaving backwards and sideways out to everything. Next to the megalithic institutionalized shredding of people's humanity, marked by tombstone malls and scabby hills, the Styrofoam gullets and flag-waving god-chatterers casting their votes for eternal paternity on the lap rapists—next to all of that, the intimacy between a terrorist and his target was almost a beautiful thing but I still couldn't solve that moment when they did it anyway so I grabbed more paper and widened my field of vision. I was mapping a basaltic flow of sub-cultural conflicts on individuality and Marxism when a large bomb went off in the courtyard outside my window. It shook the building and left my windows rattling. I ran out. Someone screamed and I flew down the stairs with the blood in my ears pounding and everything sounding like it does when you're on nitric oxide and I burst through the heavy front

doors onto a quiet, autumn quad. The sun was everywhere and the leaves were just turning gold and red and falling like open palms to the waving grass.

I stood in front of the Walmart with the banners waving and the white papers flapping and the lines swelling all the time and I knew what I was going to see. People were honking by the front of the store and security was trying to get some of the cars out and I was crying and hitting my hips with my fists.

Then I saw Tamara. She was coming out of the store with her arms full of bags. The red backpack was gone. I knew it was just a matter of time.

I could have screamed but it wouldn't have done anything and I could have tried to get them to evacuate the building but if they hadn't let me in before they wouldn't now and she was just walking away and there was nothing to do but watch and I didn't want to because I had already seen it last year when they said it was far away over the Black Sea and past pools of green light but it wasn't. It was my neighborhood. I think the school kids were black and that's why it didn't get covered here and that's why they were all speaking a different language. It was slang. And now they are celebrating it with a sale to commemorate the ribbon cutting with fifty percent off for school kids but it's only today because it's their birthday and they're singing songs to little African birds and I have to do something. I stopped pacing and moved toward the crowd again. I wanted to say goodbye because someone should and you can't expect the parents to be there and I want to see their faces and sing happy birthday for them, all those sweet little liver hearts, as they march into the store the second it's unlocked by the regional manager smiling bald and shiny because he opened late because the district manager told him Jesus was gonna be there and he believed him but he wasn't so he waited while the kids pressed their sweet black faces against the glass and passing notes (I wish I knew what they said but I can't read Cyrillic and they wouldn't show them to me anyway) I'm going to wait by where the carts are and I'm going to sing happy birthday to each and every one of them with their name and not just verse for all of them together but one for each even though I can't pronounce some of their names like Prichnikovaya and don't know how to spell the made-up ones like Levonda. Lavonda? And I want to say it right because it's the last time they're going to hear it and I want them to know I did my best.

And I ran at the crowd but they grabbed me again and said to leave or they were calling the cops but I didn't want to leave the little liver hearts because you shouldn't be afraid like that, not when someone needs you, you should be able to look them in the eye, even if they're dying and your scared and you can't do anything, you shouldn't run even if they're howling and bleeding, you should stay and sit with them while they go because someone should and you just shouldn't be afraid like that, enough to leave them alone like that when they only have a few minutes left, you should be there.

So I ran back up to where I was and sat down with the fear like acid inside me, on fire with tears streaming down my face and duct tape wrapped so tight around my hands they were numb. I sat there because there was nowhere left to go. I was at the spine of the world. Turning away was as bad as leaving, or hiding in a college, or a restaurant, or clutching the torn shred of a failed movement or pretending to build one out of spectacle. It was all the same. I turned to the store, fixed my eyes on a patch of cement that ran along the front and waited. I knew what was coming. I saw it every night. People filled their carts and packed their trunks and every time a bus pulled up and kids ran out I made myself stay because even though I knew there was a timer on the bomb, I didn't know when it was set to go off and I didn't want to look away.

The sky changed color and the variegated tones of the cars in the parking lot shifted every few hours. I sat there all day, burning. I saw Tamara across the lot. She was watching too but I didn't care anymore and she went away. She was just there to see if I still was. I know her. She's like that.

It got dark and the crowds thinned. The streetlights turned off and the emergency lamps came on and the Walmart was still lit, bright and white, as the employees walked out to their cars and drove away. The tall manager came out last and locked the doors and left and I sat there listening to the quiet. I thought I heard the trickle of water in a culvert but I don't know.