

ZAZEN

Ch 28—The Skateboard Sutta

I don't know how long I was there before I realized nothing was going to happen. Nor do I know how many times that thought came to me before it stayed. It would hit me, suddenly; Tamara's not going to do it. She never was. She wouldn't. And then that thought would get replaced by slivers of her speech glued into a new constructed meaning and I could see that we had only seconds, that she would do it, and then I would know beyond any doubt that the Walmart was about to explode with all those kids inside. I'd wait with every muscle tense, my heart splayed helpless, a jellyfish on the sand. And then nothing would happen and I had no idea why.

Tamara might have planned to bomb the Walmart and run into a technical snag. Or she might have changed her mind. Maybe she was just buying rope and forgot her bag inside. Maybe it was all going to happen tomorrow.

I sat through every possibility. The fear dissipated and the shame rose then went the other way. Countless times, when I was on the verge of leaving, my thoughts would take a new form, new sight or sound or feeling or just a desire for it all to be true so that I wouldn't have to wait like that anymore. And all of it would come back, the terrible conviction, and I'd run after it until it vanished again and I fell clutching. I saw a thousand specters and grabbed at 999 of them.

Hours after the store closed, a station wagon drove out onto the empty lot. It slowed to a stop in the middle and a man got out of it. He was in his forties, stout with thin hair. He came around the other side of the car and waited. A young girl climbed out and he handed her the keys. She got in the driver seat and he looked around, probably because it was past curfew. Then he got in beside her. She tried to start the car but it stalled. She tried it again and it went a few feet and stalled. Finally she got it going and lurched forward. She drove in a shaky line, then slammed on the brakes and stalled it again. I watched her like there was nothing between us, like we were inside each other.

At the end of an hour she could keep the car going. She drew lazy circles on the grid of the lot before pulling into a parking space and getting out.

After they left I was alone. I heard bullets and felt deep tremors in the earth but I didn't move. Cady sat beside me and I was afraid that if I stirred for even a second, she would be gone. I stayed that way all night and let her leave on her own. Some things are so sad that they have no name. I have tried to name them and I can't. I sat there and watched those things dissolve into that wasted land.

People will do anything. Smash a kid's head against a rock. Maim Silver Backs and drag them across a square. Run through landmines to protect someone they've never met. Waste their bodies on grace. A high wire, a hurdle, a diving plane. It's chemistry and people are shifting compounds, not elements like I thought. Sitting up all night, watching the Walmart fail to blow up, I saw an endless spectrum. I don't mean some soft sell about life on the banks or shades of gray. What I saw was a spectacle. A death chamber. A chandelier. A thousand rooms. By the edge of an industrial park with my face burnt and my swollen duct-taped hands, I finally joined the human race. I became a tenant in that house.

I felt like a sun, expanding and brighter than anything. My fingertips burned and my red eyes looked over the emptiness. I cut the tape off my hands and watched the skin turn from white blue to pale pink as blood flowed back into them.

The parking lot glistened, a black frozen lake. There was light atop the subdivisions. I stood up and fell over, scratching my face and neck on the clipped branches of the tangled shrubs. When I got back up my legs were on fire. I stamped my foot and millions of nails went through my sole fast enough to shatter my clay femur and I fell again.

There was a trickle of water. I hadn't imagined it. It was quiet enough for me to hear it and I followed the sound. I climbed over a mound of bark chip landscaping. On the other side was a drainage pipe through which clear water ran. It was a culvert under some kind of utility road. But the road had

moved, curving now to the left and wider. The old cement was torn away and the ribs of the pipe left exposed, oxidizing in the open air.

I limped over to it and knelt down to get some water on forehead. I was in a land between, not over the Black Ocean, not on the shores of New Honduras, not in the forests of Grace Mountain. A ghost on the site of the Blackberry Massacre.

I unbraided my hair and combed it with my fingers then washed my face for real. My sweatshirt was filthy so I took it off and held it in the icy water until it was soaked then used it as a rag to clean my calves and arms and to wipe my boots. Then I left it there at the mouth of the drainage pipe and walked, bare-armed out onto a side road that fed into Value Town Outlet Parkway.

There were a few cars on the road and some busses. People were going to work. I stood around at a bus stop for a while listening to people talk. Some kind of Southeast Asian language, Cambodian maybe. They were dressed like Mexicans and had hard plastic names tags. Señor Chankrisna. Señor Nath. Señoritas Boupaha and Thirith with their lemon and cherry striped panchos and black pants, passing around a pack of Cambodian cigarettes with white hawk on it. I watched the bus doors open and fold shut behind them. I didn't get on. I waited as groups came and went.

I saw men in satin union jackets, hung over and red. I saw bleached blonde Latinas with fake violet nails embedded with rhinestones tapping their fingers, clicking them against hard vinyl purses. I saw black, white and Filipino nursing assistants in Hawaiian scrubs tall and wide with bent backs and thin gold crosses laying like silk over their clavicles. I can't say what I saw. I saw mean children and scared men and disoriented women in wigs from costume stores and pressed and shaven Arabic men with wedding rings and polished shoes and groups of teenagers swinging themselves into place, throwing back their heads with their mouths open, their arms along the seat backs as they passed, stuttering out of sight.

I got on the bus at noon and rode it into the older part of the city. I walked down the street with all the pawnshops looking in the windows. I saw a whole wall of burning TVs. Fire on every screen. And I saw my own face

flash by, a person of interest. But that was just another storyline too so I kept walking.

I ate lunch at a burrito cart on the south side of town near the water. That's where I saw the paper with my face on it. In the picture I was blonde and my hair was tied back. It was my ID photo from Davis. It didn't say much, just that they wanted to talk to me in connection with the bombings. I thought that made a lot of sense. I would want to talk to me too if I were them. But I wasn't and sat on a bench near the water and thought about other things.

I walked further south along the new promenade under the Sweetgum and Crape Myrtle trees until it dead-ended by a convenience store. A boy with a skateboard was hanging around by the dumpster talking to people when they came out. He had on a plastic trench coat and a t-shirt with a big white skull on it. I went over to him and asked him what he was doing.

"You want to buy me some beer?"

"Sure," I said and he started to hand me money but I said I'd pay for it.

He shrugged and inclined his head toward the store. He was maybe fourteen. His face was bony and his hair was died black and growing out strawberry blonde at the roots.

I got the beer and we went down by the river.

"Do you like The Misfits?" I said, pointing to his shirt.

"I just like the shirt," he said and opened his beer, "Don't really know the band."

His skateboard was tipped up pivoting gently beneath his two forefingers.

I pulled out a beer and opened it.

"What are you going to do tonight? I don't mean it in a weird way. I'm just curious."

"Get drunk. Skate around."

"Will you go home?"

"Probably."

"Why? Do you like being there?"

"My dad sucks."

“Does your dad suck worse than all this?”

I waved my arm across the water and the city and everything I saw.

“Maybe,” he said, “I don’t know.”

I took one more beer and let him have the rest. The sun was setting and I wanted to say something helpful but I knew he wouldn’t understand so I said something stupid that made no sense because I had been thinking things all day and there was no way I could explain them and I shouldn’t even have tried.

“Everything’s on fire,” I said, “The guy who won’t sell you the beer, your dad, the Ravage all around us, your feelings about the music you like, it’s all on fire.

“Well, I wish it was on fire for real,” he said and kicked his board down, “Because this all sucks.”

“Yeah, well me too. I wish it had all burned away so I wouldn’t have to watch.”

He put the beer under his arm and headed off in one direction toward an apartment complex that I’d passed on my way down. I headed off in another.

It took me an hour to find a pack of crickets imaginative enough to believe that I should be taken in to custody. It wasn’t penitence. It was just a lack of options.